

Historic Preservation Commission Agenda

MOLLY LM SMITH

Chair

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PATRICK BOYD

VACANT

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON AIA

CHARLOTTE KONCZAL ESQ.

JOE MOORE

CRAIG SCHARTON, M.S.

Assistant Director

KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON, M.A.

Secretary

Historic Preservation Project Manager

WILL TACKETT, Planner III

Any interested person may appear at the public hearing and present written testimony, or speak in favor or against the matters scheduled on the agenda.

If you challenge these matters in court, you may be limited to raising only those issues you or someone else raised in oral or written testimony at or before the close of the hearing.

The meeting room is accessible to the physically disabled, and the services of a translator can be made available. Requests for additional accommodations for the disabled, signers, assistive listening devices, or translators should be made one week prior to the meeting. Please call the Historic Preservation Project Manager at 621-8520.

The Historic Preservation Commission welcomes you to this meeting.

January 23, 2012

MONDAY

5:30 p.m.

City Hall, Second Floor, CONFERENCE ROOM A, 2600 FRESNO STREET

I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

II. APPROVE MEETING MINUTES

A . Approve minutes of December 3, 2011 Off-Site Workshop.

III. APPROVE AGENDA



**REPORT TO THE HISTORIC
PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

AGENDA ITEM NO. VB
HPC MEETING: 01/23/2012

January 23,, 2012

FROM: CRAIG SCHARTON, Assistant Director
Development and Resource Management Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON
Historic Preservation Project Manager
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

SUBJECT: CONSIDER RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL OF A REQUEST BY THE OWNER OF THE 4.41 ACRE PARCEL LOCATED WITHIN THE BOUNDARY OF THE PROPERTY PREVIOUSLY DESIGNATED AS HP#177, TO AMEND THE LOCAL REGISTER NOMINATION TO REMOVE HER PARCEL FROM THE AREA DESIGNATED AS A HISTORIC RESOURCE PURSUANT TO FMC 12-1614 AND 12-1609.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission review the attached documents, as requested from staff at the January 9, 2012 Commission meeting. Staff further recommends that the Commission continue this item indefinitely, until such time as an archaeological investigation is prepared for the 4.41 acre parcel by a consultant meeting the Secretary of Interior's Professional Qualifications for Historic Archaeology.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forestiere Underground Gardens is a designated historic property on the City's Local Register of Historic Resources (HP# 177). It is also a registered California Historical Landmark (No. 916) and is listed as well on the National Register of Historic Places (Exhibit B). When designated, the site was a ten acre parcel "less streets and roads" (NR nomination 28 March 1977). In 1991 the parcel was divided between two branches of the Forestiere family, with the western 4.29 acres containing "all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens'" partitioned from the "real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens.'" Based on this 1991 court judgment, and the desire to sell and/or develop the eastern 4.41 acre parcel, the property owner, Mary Forestiere, is requesting that the Commission recommend to the City Council that her property be removed from the Local Register of Historic Resources. Pursuant to FMC 12-1609(b)(2), a public notice regarding this agenda item was published in the Fresno Bee on December 3, 2011.

To amend the designation of a property listed on the Local Register of Historic Resources the action "shall result from new information, the discovery of earlier misinformation or change of original circumstances, conditions or factors which justified the designation of the Resource or District" (FMC 12-1614). The request by the property owner to delist the eastern parcel from the boundaries of the historic resource designated as the Forestiere Underground Gardens was reviewed by the Commission on December 12, 2011 and continued to a Special Meeting of the Commission held on January 9, 2012. No final decision was made that evening to allow in part for additional research. On January 7 and January 14, 2012 staff and Commissioners toured both the eastern and western parcels of the Gardens with the property owners. Staff also researched the aerial maps available from 1937, contacted the Pop Laval archives and requested additional information from the Fresno Historical Society archives (Exhibit C). Family members representing the property owners Ric Forestiere (the Gardens) and Mary Forestiere (the eastern parcel) have also prepared materials for the Commission's review (Exhibit D).

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Based on the site visits, review of all documents on file in the City's historic preservation archives and other sundry materials (see staff reports 12.12.11 and 1.9.12, Appendix E), staff finds that there is compelling evidence to support the Commission's charge pursuant to FMC 12-1614. However, due to ongoing concerns about any potential for sub-surface cultural resources, it is the City's position that an archaeological investigation prepared by a professional historical archaeologist is required for the 4.41 acre parcel, to ensure that all due diligence has been performed for this historic site with National, State and Local significance.

BACKGROUND

From 1906 to 1946 Sicilian immigrant Baldassare Forestiere created an underground complex of 65 caverns, grottos, patios, and garden courts that encircled his subterranean home, north of the city of Fresno. He was born on July 8, 1879 in Filari, a small (now abandoned) village in the Peloritani Mountains of Messina Province, Sicily. In 1902 Baldassarre immigrated to the United States with his older brother Antonio where they worked in New York City as "sandhogs" on the Holland Tunnel and Crouton Aqueduct and later on the Boston subways. By 1906 the two brothers left the east Coast and travelled to California.

The Underground Gardens which Baldassare eventually constructed in Fresno were inter-connected with underground passageways and promenades; later he added an 800-foot-long auto tunnel. To support the great mass of earth and to give permanence to his earthen sculptings, Forestiere used Roman arches, columns, and domes, hardly the work of an amateur builder. As architect Malcolm Wells has noted: "Thirteen years of training and the best we [architects] can produce are metal and glass boxes standing in parking lots! Forestiere demolishes us with a wheelbarrow and a dream." Hardpan, mortar, and cement were used not only for structural purposes, but also for textural variety and beautification.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 28, 1977. The boundaries for the site included the "ten acre parcel less streets and roads." The nomination for the California Historical Landmark, also prepared in 1977, noted 7 acres of "grottos, patios and garden courts," although the inscription on the State Landmark plaque referred to the site as 10 acres:

NO. 916 FORESTIERE UNDERGROUND GARDENS - Here, beneath the hot, arid surface of the San Joaquin Valley, Baldasare Forestiere (1879-1946) began in the early 1900s to sculpt a fantastic retreat. Excavating the hardpan by hand, he created a unique complex of underground rooms, passages, and gardens which rambled throughout a ten-acre parcel. His work is being preserved as a living monument to a creative and individualistic spirit unbounded by conventionality.

The Underground Gardens was designated to Fresno's Local Register of Historic Resources by the Fresno City Council on 20 March 1984. The lot size noted on the inventory forms was 595 x 633 feet and the site map (also included in the nomination for the California Historical Landmark) appeared to depict extensive "unopened" resources throughout the entire parcel (Appendix B).

When Baldassare Forestiere died in 1946 the property was bequeathed to Guiseppi Forestiere, who in turn left the estate to his two sons, Joseph and Ricardo in 1973. In 1991 the property was partitioned between Joseph and Ricardo with Ricardo receiving the westerly portion and Joseph receiving the somewhat larger undeveloped eastern portion. In 1993 the Fifth District Court of Appeal affirmed the partition and the California Supreme Court denied Joseph Forestiere's petition for review (Bar Bulletin April 1994).

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The question of whether underground resources associated with Forestiere are extant on the eastern (4.41 acre) parcel is critical to the request by the property owner to essentially delist her property from the Local Register of Historic Resources. In her letter of 2 November 2011, Mrs. Mary L. Forestiere cites the decision by Judge Stephen Henry in 1991 to award the "Underground Gardens" to Rick Forestiere whereas the remaining eastern parcel was undeveloped and therefore without historic status. She also notes that she has no plans to develop the property but is attempting to sell it and wishes to have the historic status removed prior to negotiating a contract.

The 1991 "Interlocutory Judgment Directing Partition of Real Property and Personal Property" in fact described a clear separation of the property based on the location of the "Forestiere Underground Gardens," granting to one party the "real property located west of the interior fence line which contain all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as "Forestiere Underground Gardens", from all of the real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the "Forestiere Underground Gardens." The Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan of 1998 also noted that the Gardens at one time "covered in excess of ten acres," however "as a result of indifferent and hostile land use policies and development, only approximately four acres remain of the original excavations" (1998:41).

New documents:

At the January 9, 2012 meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission, staff was requested to gather additional documents that may shed light on the question of extant resource above, or below the surface on the eastern 4.41 acres. Specifically the Commission requested arials of the site, any historic photos from the Pop Laval collection, additional documents as they may exist in the Fresno Historical Society archives, as well as a copy of the National Register nomination from 1977.

High Speed Rail Consultants, AECOM of New Jersey, previously obtained and analyzed arials for the subject parcel as part of their environmental work for the proposed High-Speed Train corridor. Their staff graciously forwarded arials from 1937, c1946, c1961 and c2005. In correspondence with the architectural historian on the project, Patricia Ambacher noted that "looking at the arials and the historic topos, it didn't appear to be much above ground on that eastern parcel." When questioned specifically about a lake, even on the 1937 aerial, she responded "I don't know anything about a lake being there" (e-mail communication 12 January 2012). In contrast was correspondence from Alan Tabachnick, National Director of Cultural Resources, Transportation, for AECOM who provided an aerial overlay which included images from c1946, c1961 and c2005. He noted that it appeared the images "show that there were elements of the resource on the eastern parcel, and perhaps even some underground elements along or over the parcel line" (e-mail correspondence 17 January 2012). His e-mail was followed up by telephone correspondence on the same day.

The "underground elements along or over the parcel line" would appear to include the steps, the former smokehouse and the west side room/leading to the steps, which once connected to a lake [please see prior discussion in the January 9, 2012 staff report, as attached]. In conversation, Mr. Tabachnick wondered if the region in the north part of the arials is a stream, or some other water feature. As this is the site of the former lake it is possible that vegetation and contours of the lake are depicted in the arials (Exhibit F). It should be recalled, however, that even by 1977 the National Register nomination for the full 8.8 acre property noted that there were only "vanishing traces" of this lake, which had mostly been in-filled

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by tenants for a parking lot. By 1961 a structure (the "souvenir shop") and parking lot are clearly visible on the northern end of the eastern parcel.

On January 10, 2012 staff sent a request to Elizabeth Laval regarding any historic photos in the Pop Laval collection which depicted above ground resources, particularly on the eastern parcel. Ms. Laval responded on 12 January that there are no photos "from around the property" in their collection, only photos from the Gardens. Similarly, a request was sent to Sharon Hiigel at the Historical Society. In a telephone conversation with Ms. Hiigel, additional documents, not previously obtained or in the City's historic preservation archives, were identified. On 17 January 2012 copies of the following were hand delivered: "Creative Responses to the Italian American Experience in California: Baldassare Forestiere's 'Underground Gardens' and Simon Rodia's 'Watts Towers,'" (reprint from The Italian American Review 2001), a Fresno Morning Republican article dated 8 May 1927 "Forestiere's Folly: A Fresno Underground Chateau," and the 11 December 1946 obituary for Baldassare Forestiere from the Fresno Bee (Exhibit C).

The article by Kenneth Scambray in the Italian American Review is easily the most academic and thoughtful look at Forestiere and his life work in Fresno. The paper includes information from interviews with Forestiere family members and Conservancy member Silvio Manno, and describes Forestiere's work as "illuminating expressions of the Italian immigrant experience." One point of interest is that the author notes that before his death, Forestiere had excavated approximately one hundred rooms or chambers, although in a footnote Scambray observes that "it is difficult to agree on the exact number or rooms." Included in this footnote is mention of recent discoveries adjacent to the Gardens of "more Forestiere grottoes." It may be assumed that this references the three chamber underground "house" on the Hinojosa property to the west of the current Gardens which was included in a Caltrans study in 2002.

The Fresno Morning Republican article includes a series of photographs of the underground features of the Gardens, as they existed in 1927, with no additional information about a lake or any reference to potential resources which have been discussed on what is now the east parcel. The obituary of 1946 mentions "60 rooms under a five acre tract of land."

In addition to these primary and secondary documents, family members representing both Ric Forestiere and Mary Forestiere have submitted letters, as attached (Exhibit D).

Archaeological Survey

Over the past six weeks staff has analyzed numerous documents as well as testimony provided during the two prior hearings held on December 12, 2011 and January 9, 2012. In brief, there does not appear to be any substantial evidence that has been placed on the record that supports the existence of either surface or sub-surface deposits on the east parcel which meet the definition of a "historical resource," with the possible exception of the stairs and footings for the former "smokehouse" which lie along the parcel boundary, as previously discussed (January 9, 2012 staff report). However, the lingering concern that there MAY be resources underground, whether collapsed tunnels or a wine cellar, is enough to give City staff pause and to require, prior to any final recommendation, an archaeological survey of the east 4.41 acres. As discussed briefly in the December 12, 2011 staff report it is important to remember that whether there are completed tunnels or rooms that are extant and structurally sound may be moot as both the National Register as well as the Local Register of Historic Resources include a provision for resources that "yield or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory of history" (Criterion iv, Local Register FMC 12-1607 (a) (1) (iv)).

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CONCLUSION

Staff thus returns to the recommendation first made in the December 12th staff report, for an evaluation of the site by a professional cultural specialist/historic archaeologist, using perhaps the tool of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). Any study must be conducted by a professional meeting the Secretary of Interior's Professional Qualifications for the discipline. Staff, Commissioners, and of course property owners for the east parcel should work collaboratively with any consulting firm to design a reasonable scope of work that uses trenching and/or ground penetrating radar or other technologies to assess the location of any possible sub-surface features. It would seem reasonable to focus specifically on the area immediately east of the stairs, with only spot testing in other locations. This study would hope to conclusively support a final determination of the existence, or not, of features. One typical archaeological protocol, incidentally, is to record and then "cap" over resources, rather than to dig an entire site or even to restrict any and all future development.

Another option available to the property owner is to suspend the request for a boundary change, and allow any future project developer to prepare and provide required environmental reviews and studies. The entire 8.8 acre site is conditioned already by mitigations included in the Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan (see December 12 staff report) and remains within the boundaries of both the National Register and California Landmark site. .

Attachments:

- Exhibit A - 2008 Aerial of the Forestiere Underground Gardens.
- Exhibit B - National Register and State Landmark Nominations 1977.
- Exhibit C - Archival materials, Fresno Historical Society.
- Exhibit D - Letter to Historic Preservation Commission from Marc Forestiere 9 January 2012; Presentation to the HPC by Anthony Forestiere, 9 January 2012; Response to Marc Forestiere's January 9, 2012 letter to The HPC 10 from Anthony Forestiere 10 January 2012.
- Exhibit E - Staff reports for December 12 2011 and January 9, 2012 (without appendices).
- Exhibit F - Aerials of Forestiere Underground Gardens 1937, c1946, c1950, c1961 and 2005.

2008 Aerial
of 8.70 Acre
Site
Designated
as the
Forestiere
Underground
Gardens

- A: Old Smoke House
- B. Below Ground Patio
- C. Exit Stairway
- D. Lake site
- G. Site of Old Souvenir Shop



NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED
RECEIVED CITY OF FRESNO

DATE 1003 FEB -3 PM 1:39

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Forestiery Underground Gardens

AND/OR COMMON

Forestiery Gardens

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

5021 West Shaw Avenue, Fresno, California 93711

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF Fresno

17th

STATE

California

CODE

COUNTY

Fresno

CODE

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

X MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

X PRIVATE

X UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

X STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

X EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

NO

MILITARY

X OTHER: Memorial

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Rosario Forestiere

Joseph Forestiere

STREET & NUMBER

629 West Robinwood Lane

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

VICINITY OF

STATE

California

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Fresno County Records Office, Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER

2281 Tulare Street, Room 302

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

STATE

California

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Heritage Fresno

(Historic Homes - American Assn. of University Women - Fresno
Branch)

DATE

1975

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY X LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Published by Pioneer Publishing Co.,

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

STATE

California

[7] DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

☐ EXCELLENT ☐ DETERIORATED
☒ GOOD Deteriorated ☐ RUINS
☐ FAIR in parts ☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☒ UNALTERED
☐ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE
☐ MOVED DATE _____

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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno, California, is in the central San Joaquin Valley, three miles southeast of the San Joaquin River and approximately midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere are contained in the remaining ten acres (less streets and roads) of an original seventy some odd acre parcel. What remains is basically unaltered and exists in its original form, save for deterioration due to rain, erosion and neglect.

Ravages of time, reverses of fortune and subsequent neglect diminished the scope and size of the Forestiere Gardens over the years. Several blocks of acreage were sold. Yet in spite of these misfortunes, in spite of subsequent encroachments of commercial and industrial developments and the pre-emptions of land for irrigation ditches, streets, easements and freeways, ten acres remain. These contain the original underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere, parts of which were left to fall into a state of disrepair. Photos and descriptions of many of these neglected areas are dated 1923 and earlier.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens is a complex of underground caverns, grottos, patios, and garden courts encircling the underground home of Baldasare Forestiere. They are inter-connected with underground passageways and promenades together with a lengthy auto tunnel (some 800' long) which winds its way through the gardens. These are embellished with planters of various shapes and sizes, many with built-in recessed seats of hardpan, mortar and cement. There are columns, arches and domes of hardpan - a native sedimentary stone that is pervasive to the area. Some ceilings are vaulted and carved like inverted tea cups under the mantle of hardpan with a shallow layer of thick heavy topsoil. Others have skylights adorned with redwood arbors and pergolas with cascading grapevines. Over his living areas skylights were made which he covered in the winter with window pane glass to keep out the rain, yet allow in natural lighting. In the planters throughout the gardens a wide variety of trees were planted, some of them rare. Many citrus trees were grafted with a variety of citrus; one tree having some 7 different varieties. Some of the rare trees after almost seventy years still prosper and bear fruit. Varieties that he planted are Almond, Pomegranate, Italian Pear, Bartlett Pear, Olives, Persimmons, Avocado, Loquat, Quince, Carob (St. John's Bread), Jujube (Oriental Date), Arbutus Unedo (Strawberry tree), Black Fig, Tangerine, Grapefruit, Sweet and Sour Orange, Japanese Kumquat, Lemons, Date Palm and Mulberry.

A small fish pond is found in the garden court off the kitchen and bedroom areas which is crossed by a small foot bridge. Also located elsewhere in the gardens is a walk-in and walk-under aquarium. He made a circular glass bottom through which tropical fish could be observed. On ground level there was a small lake of which only a few remnants remain. Vanishing traces can only faintly be detected, which instead of being enlarged as contemplated, was filled in by tenants for the present parking lot.

The underground home and gardens were designed and sculpted with hand tools by Baldasare Forestiere, a Sicilian immigrant who in the early part of the century

continued

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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DATE ENTERED

Description

continued

CONTINUATION SHEET

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in his spare time as a vineyardist and horticulturist found sufficient time to devote to such a remarkable and extra-ordinary undertaking.

"Beneath the well cultivated acres of his ranch...working alone in his spare time...Forestiere excavated fifty rooms connected with passageways ...rooms are skylighted...clusters of big yellow lemons and grapefruit and orange blossoms...vines spread upward and outward forming a green roof from which clusters of grapes hang...A great tunnel has been excavated for automobile traffic...a glass bottom fishbowl room...a small lake is already in existence and will be enlarged to cover a great extent of the establishment...leading into the center of the lake will be a tunnel from the underground workings which will allow visitors to ascend from the depths and enjoy boating and other aquatic sports...near one of the deeper caverns there is a gasoline engine that operates the pump...there are ten acres with several stories down...A sight worth seeing...it will in years to come be one of the show places of the west..." (Fresno Bee, 1923-24).

Baldasare Forestiere continued with his creations for yet another 23-24 years, after the above descriptions were written. He died in 1946 at the age of 67. His desire to be laid to rest at the Gardens was never fulfilled. He was buried instead at Holy Cross Cemetery, some five miles south of the Gardens.

[B] SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1946	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) Unique Conceptual Process	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

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SPECIFIC DATES 1906-1946

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Baldasare Forestiere

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Forestiere Underground Gardens in Central San Joaquin Valley, in California is widely recognized for its originality and uniqueness. Visitors from across the country and overseas declare that there is nothing quite like it. Architects have attempted to identify it as "Terra-tecture". (Science Digest - 11/1975). Yet artists have described it as "Terra-sculpture" a form of walk-in and walk-around sculpture. There is a blending of these two conceptual thought processes for which newly coined words do not adequately portray their significance. The Underground Gardens are merged and blended into a unique variety of combinations.

Settling on the semi-desert land, baked and scorched by the summer sun, Baldasare Forestiere began in the early 1900's to carve and sculpt a thoroughly unique underground retreat to escape the excessive heat. After nearly forty years with hand tools and persistent effort, he succeeded in creating a cool subterranean complex, a piece of the old mediterranean world fashioned after the "visions stored in my mind". (Fresno Bee 5/23/24).

To avoid monotony and a barren appearance, these sculptings and creations are complemented with novel landscapes and unique horticultural experiments..."everywhere there are arches and domed ceilings and windows with lovely views and pleasing vistas" (Heritage Fresno). They reveal explorations with the control of growth through the controlling of sunlight and root systems. Trees with a variety of citrus on a single tree attest to his experiments with grafting, budding and propagating techniques. Some trees over sixty some-odd years still exist. One tree, some twenty-two feet below ground surface has eight grafts of citrus, of which seven still flourish and bear fruit today.

By coming to an understanding with his environment, he was able to modify it. The extremes in temperature (from the low 20's to 115 plus degrees) was almost more than one accustomed to a mediterranean frost-free climate could endure. A severe and semi-desert environment was moderated and made more temperate. By creating varying micro-climates throughout his underground home and gardens, a dramatic transformation soon resulted. "the fruit hangs almost twice as long...frost never touches this region...the temperature seldom changes over ten degrees the year round". (The Fresno Bee 3/23/23).

Acting as his own designer and engineer, Baldasare Forestiere used his knowledge and ability with amazing skill and craftsmanship. He designed just right for light and ventilation, strength and durability. To support the great mass of earth and to

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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Statement of significance, continued

CONTINUATION SHEET

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give permanence to his earthen sculptures, he used the ancient Roman arch, column and dome. Hardpan, mortar and cement were used not only for structural purposes, but for textural variety and beautification. Being his own architect, he did not require a blueprint. He chose instead to follow his own creative instincts and aesthetic impulses. "No plans were made. Every detail in the development of the underground gardens has originated in the brain of Forestiere and has never been set on paper. Gradually he has evolved a comprehensive scheme that will connect up into one of the most involved and yet delightful labyrinths of modern ages" (Fresno Bee, 3/23/23).

The Underground Gardens stand as a testament to the spirit of individualism and the uniqueness of man. They are physical extensions and representations of unique mental concepts. Novel explorations in the control of space and form, the controlling of light and air. The control of and creating of various climates in days before electricity and air-conditioning were available to him. By explorations in the harmony and contrast of textures and materials, creative expressions evoke ever-changing moods and feelings with the varied changes in the physical surroundings... "Variety and originality of design are the predominating impressions left in the mind of the sight-seer. In no two of the reception rooms is an idea repeated. In no place does the working out of the idea of the builder reach the monotonous. A fertile mind filled with ideas is expressed in every turn of the twisting tunnels" (Fresno Bee 3/23/23). One is constantly made aware of the multi-faceted personality of its creator. An imprint of a totally sincere and unpretentious life without tinsel and artificiality.

In the days before power tools and earth moving machinery, such determination and perserverance is a tribute to an indomitable spirit. It is all the more amazing that "with simple hand tools as a pick, a shovel and a wheelbarrow and an incredible amount of hard work, Baldasare Forestiere... created a lush mediterranean setting around his home". (Treasures of America). Forestiere's life and work is a memorial to one who came to terms with a hostile environment and created a life of compatability and harmony with nature and mother earth.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

UTM REFERENCES

A	_____	_____	_____
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C	_____	_____	_____

B	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

West

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
None - entirely contained in Fresno County			
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Lorraine Faulks Forestiere

ORGANIZATION

629 West Robinwood Lane

STREET & NUMBER

Fresno

CITY OR TOWN

March 28, 1977

DATE _____

439-7344.

TELEPHONE

California 93704

STATE

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

NATIONAL _____ STATE _____ LOCAL _____

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE _____

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE _____

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE _____

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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DATE ENTERED

Major Bibliographical References

continued

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9

PAGE page 2

- ✓ Historic Homes Committee (American Assn. of University Women-Fresno Branch)
Heritage Fresno, Pioneer Publishing Company, Fresno, California, 1975
- ✓ La Presse, Les Jardins Souterrains de Fresno, La Presse, Canada, Auriel 1976.
- ✓ Readers Digest, Treasures of America, Readers Digest Assn., Inc., Pleasantville, New York, September 1975.
- ✓ Thornburn, Joseph, Tunnel Artist Builds Cave Resort, Fresno Bee, Fresno, California, May 3, 1924 - .7. 1-3.
- ✓ Wampler, Jan, Baldasare Forestiere, Architecture Plus, July/August 1974.
- ✓ Wampler, Jan, All Their Own, Schenkman Publishing Co., Cambridge, Mass., 1977.

Resource Persons:

Wampler, Jan, Master of Architecture degree, Harvard Graduate School of Design., Associate Professor Architect and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, Massachusetts, and a practicing architect.

APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION OF HISTORICAL LANDMARK

Name of Proposed Landmark Forestiere Underground Gardens

Location 5021 West Shaw Avenue

Fresno, California

County Fresno

Name and Address of Landowner upon Whose Property Landmark is Proposed

R. Ricardo Forestiere, 5021 W. Shaw Ave. Fresno, Ca.

Name and Address of Applicant Lorraine Faulks-Forestiere Phone No. (209) 439-7344

629 W. Robinwood, Fresno, Ca. Bus. Phone No. (209) 485-3281

Is this landmark of statewide significance as described in the State of Policy? Yes

Explain (use extra sheet if necessary):

The underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere in the central San Joaquin Valley is the work of a self-taught designer and builder. It is the only structure of its kind in the state. And is also likely to be the last. The likelihood of such a structure being reduplicated is minimal. Modern contemporary life and the frenetic pace of society preclude its reoccurrence in the foreseeable future.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens, as it is commonly known, is a testamentary tribute to the harmony and compatibility between man and his environment. It exemplifies the degree to which such a reconciliation is possible. Its ecological and educational implications are readily evident. The result is a three-dimensional harmonious example of man's peaceful co-existence with his environment. Its cultural and experimental aspects graphically illustrate such a concept.

Is bibliography complete? (To enable verification of statements and claims made herein.) Yes, as far as possible.

Is permission of property owner for registration attached? Yes.

Is approval of property owner to place a plaque attached? Yes.

Is proof of reasonable protection for requested landmark attached? Yes.

Are photographs, prints, or drawings (two views) attached? Yes.

BRIEF HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION (Corresponding to one or more items under I, II, or III of the Statement of Policy.)

Under the semi-desert land of the central San Joaquin Valley, Baldasare Forestiere began in the early 1900's (1904-1906) to carve and to sculpt a thoroughly unique and fantastic underground retreat. Between his chores as vineyardist and horticulturist after some forty years, he re-created a piece of the old mediterranean world under a terrain baked and scorched by the summer sun. He fashioned it after a "vision stored in his mind" (Fresno Bee 5-3-24). What resulted is a novel, though perhaps unorthodox, art-form.

The some seven acres of grottos, patios, and garden courts, is adorned with citrus trees, grape pergolas and cascading vines and interconnected with passageways and promenades. It is widely recognized for its originality and uniqueness. Visitors from across the country and from overseas attest that there is nothing quite like it. Visiting architects have attempted to identify it as "territecture"- an ecological earthen structure with architectural and conservational implications. Visiting artists, sculptors and writers have attempted to describe it as "terrasculpture"- a form of walk-in, walk-through, and walk-around sculpture. Although these terms are not explicitly descriptive, they do assist in describing the underground home and its encircling garden-courts and patios. They do help define the merger of these two conceptual art-formations. There is sufficient evidence of inter-related and interdisciplinary harmony.

Acting as his own designer, engineer and builder, Baldasare Forestiere used his creative ability with amazing skill and craftsmanship. He designed just right for light and ventilation. To give support to the great mass of earth and to give permanence to his earthen sculptings, he used the ancient column, arch and dome. Hardpan, a native sedimentary rock, together with mortar and concrete was used for structural purposes, textural variety and beautification. Being his own architect, he did not require a blueprint (Fresno Bee 3-23-24); but chose instead to follow creative instincts and aesthetic impulses.

The home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere are physical manifestations of unique thought processes. They are concrete representations of novel conceptual explorations. They are explorations in the use and control of space and form- by a sculptural process of subtraction. Experiments in the use and control of light and ventilation. Explorations in climatic control and the creation of micro-climates. Experimentation with the contrast and harmony of textures and materials. They are all three-dimensional embodiments of a creative and aesthetic sensitivity. A severe and awesome environment was moderated in the process; and rendered sensibly, pleasant and fruitful.

In its totality, the underground home and gardens is a physical extension of the lifestyle and personality of Baldasare Forestiere. Conceptually and aesthetically it is a biography of a very unique person. It reflects a thoroughly independent and individualistic spirit. It is an imprint of a totally sincere and unpretentious life. It represents in a gentle manner a coming to terms with one's environment.

~~1/1/1~~

BIBLIOGRAPHY: CITE THE BOOKS, RECORDS, AND OTHER AUTHORITIES SUSTAINING THESE FACTS.

C. E. Good, Resort Underground, Fresno Bee, Fresno, California, March 23, 1923.

Thornburn, Joseph. Tunnel Artist Builds Cave Resort. Fresno Bee, Fresno, California. May 3, 1924.

Wampler, Jan. Baldasare Forestiere. Architecture Plus. July-Aug. 1974.

Historic Homes Committee. Heritage Fresno. (Amer. Assoc. of University Women) Pioneer Publishing Co. Fresno, California. 1975.

La Presse. Les Jardins Souterrains de Fresno. La Presse. Canada. Avriël 1976.

Readers Digest Treasures of America. Readers Digest Assn., Inc. Pleasantville, New York. September 1975.

Wampler, Jan. All Their Own. Schenkman Publishing Co. Cambridge, Mass. 1977.

Resource Persons:

Jan Wampler. Harvard Graduate School of Design. Associate Professor of Architecture and Planning. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Boston, Mass.

Galen Cranz, PhD. Associate Professor College of Environmental Design Department of Architecture. University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, California.

Malcolm Wells. Ecological Architect. Planner and Consultant on underground architecture and construction. Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Signature

Date

Janine Wampler
October 12, 1977

This form and all related correspondence is to be sent to the California Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee, Post Office Box 2390, Sacramento, California 95811.

An application must be considered solely on its historic or architectural merits and not for commercial gain, political benefits, or other non-historical reasons.

An individual committee member can advise and counsel an applicant, but all applications must be considered by the full committee meeting in regular session.

PHOTOGRAPHS, PRINTS, AND . . . DRAWINGS (Both recent and historic, if available.)

Fotos enclosed are described as numbered below; (Corresponding to photographs so numbered on the reverse side of each):

- Foto #1. Main entry to underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere. Picture taken circa 1920-21 by W. M. Strother. Donated December 1976. Copy of original.
- Foto #1A. Main entrance to underground home and gardens. View is identical to that of Foto #1. Taken c.1970 and as it appears to date.
- Foto #2. Upper view of Auto Tunnel during construction. Driveway is descending underground to the right in the background. Foto taken c.1920-21 by W. M. Strother. Donated December 1976. Copy of original.
- Foto #3. Passageway at base of main entry leading from earlier living quarters and dining area to Central Patio. Foto by W. M. Strother. Donated December 1976. Taken c.1920-21.
- Foto #4. View from Indoor Patio adjoining Central Patio. Looking through French doors into later dining room and living quarters beyond. Foto by W. M. Strother c. 1920-21. Copy.
- Foto #5. Central Patio looking out from the living quarter apartments and interconnected by passageways and promenades. Foto taken c.1970 and is as appears to date.
- Foto #6. Bedroom Court as viewed from the sleeping alcoves, raised and recessed in the bedrooms. Scene looks out over fish pond cross- by foot bridge to terrace and spice garden. Taken c.1969.
- Foto #7. Entrance to Auto Tunnel at base of gradual descending driveway. Background to Foto #2 upon completion some years later. With Forestiere's landscaping full grown. Picture taken c.1972.
- Foto #8. Baldasare Forestiere standing at side of Main Entry to his underground home and gardens. Picture taken circa 1910-15. He later landscaped the entry ramp with triple tiered steps and landings from the surface to the level of the planter in the center background. Donated by niece, Rose Sacco, February 1977. Copy of original photograph.

Lorraine Faulks-Forestiere
Fresno, California
October 12, 1977

AUTHORIZATION FROM PROPER OWNER OF PROPOSED LANDMARK SITE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
PARKS AND RECREATION FOR NUMBER, REGISTRATION, AND ERECTION OF A HISTORICAL LAND-
MARK.

WE, the undersigned owners of record of the property located
at 5021 West Shaw Avenue in Fresno, California in the County
of Fresno, more specifically described as:

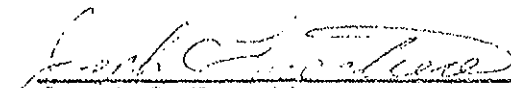
The Northeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter
of the Northeast Quarter in Section 15, Town-
ship 13 South, Range 19 East, Mount Diablo
Base and Meridian;

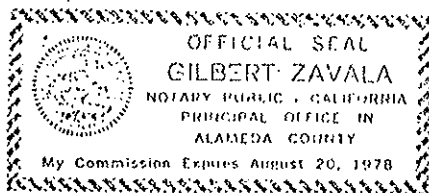
And also commonly known as the FORESTIERE UNDERGROUND GARDENS,
do hereby grant to the Department of Parks and Recreation of
the State of California the necessary authorization for the
assignment of number, registration and erection of an
Historical Landmark, as required above.

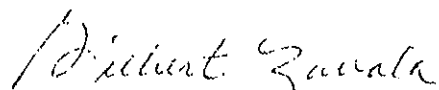
It is also the intent of the undersigned owners of the above
property to preserve and maintain the premises primarily as
a Memorial Estate; and to perpetuate it as a tribute to the
spirit of individualism and vision that distinguished so
many of our early forebearers.

Granted in Fresno, California, in the County of Fresno, on
this 12 day of October 1977.

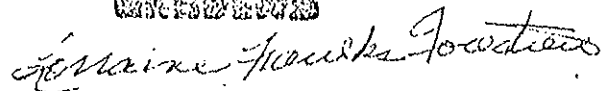

R. Ricardo Forestiere


Joseph C. Forestiere




October 12, 1977





Malcolm Wells comments

(See Wells' "Underground Architecture" in Fall '76 CQ)

Re: Forestiere's Underground Gardens

Dear Mr. Brand:

Your request for a technical analysis and "how-to" evaluation of Forestiere's work gives me a perfect opportunity to use one of my three¹ favorite architectural quotations,

Buildings should speak for themselves²

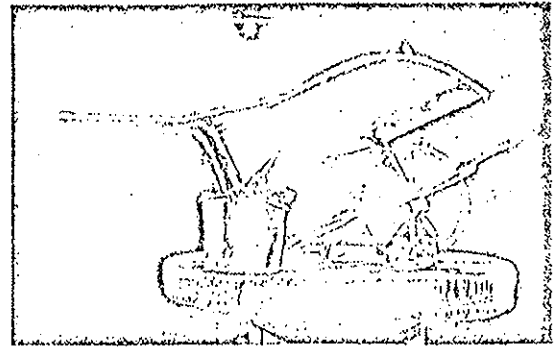
Are Forestiere's Underground Gardens actually buildings, though? Bernard Rudofsky calls such spaces architecture by subtraction. Well, whether they're buildings or not, they do speak for themselves — eloquently — if what I see and read in the Examiner are to be believed. Here is space so simple a glance is all anyone needs to understand it completely.

We architects spend from five to eight years in college, and another three to five years in apprenticeship, before the state considers us ready to offer our gems to the waiting public, and look what we give it! Thirteen years of training and the best we can produce are metal and glass boxes standing in parking lots! Forestiere demolishes us with a wheelbarrow and a dream.

You want a technical analysis of his work? I'll give you one: there it stands. The Gardens exist; what more can I say? Do we need computer studies to prove these fantastic spaces successful? How many others, covering thousands of square feet and costing only \$300, can you name?

How to do it? Easy: dig.

No, it's not as easy as that. Only a Forestiere could do such things. I might try, and get nothing but cave-ins. Or tap an underground river. You see, he knew. You look at those gardens and it's obvious. They almost seem to have existed before Forestiere arrived. He simply set them free. The trees that grow there, the love of life you feel, and the strange attraction of the Gardens, all



The tools: All the work was done by hand

indicate that this was not your average ditch-digger. Not by a long shot.

I'm fascinated by the untutored genius that appears now and then, even in the humblest of people, driving its host against all odds to do what he must. Rodia of Watts. Gaudi of Barcelona. Forestiere. Speculation about the source of such gifts inevitably leads to a confrontation with the unanswerable, but it also gives us, I think, our best reason for hope.

Malcolm Wells
Cherry Hill, New Jersey

1. The other two: Thoreau's "... all work passes out of the hands of the architect into the hands of nature, to be perfected." And now this gem from Forestiere: "To make it crooked and make it look nice — that's the real work."

2. Was it Wright who said this? I forget, but it's right on target.



The underground gourmet: Forestiere's simple kitchen

13 S, R. 19 E., M.D.B. & A.

Tax Area

181-C03

181-C04

311-13

Bk.
306

Forestiere
Underground
Gardens

W. SHAW

Superimposed Map- Jan Hampl, Assoc. Prof.
School of Architecture & Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

1" = 10'

10 11
15 14

100' AVE.

29

1. Entrance
2. Entrance Hall
3. Planter
4. Well
5. Living Room
6. Kitchen
7. Church
8. Chapel
9. Automobile Tunnel
10. Pedestrian Tunnel
11. Winery
12. Light Well
13. Stairs
14. Walkway
15. Patio
16. Sump Pit
17. Hothouse
18. Indoor Patio
19. Bedroom
20. Bedroom Court
21. Bathroom
22. Reading Room
23. Stairs to Lower Level
24. Tunnel Under
25. Glass Bottom Aquar
26. Nursery
27. Restaurant (incompl
28. Kitchen
29. Unopened

N. CORNELIA

16

Assessor's Map Bk 311 - Pg. 13

County of Fresno, Calif.

NOTE - Assessor's Block Numbers Shown in Ellipses
Assessor's Parcel Numbers Shown in Circles

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

BERKELEY • DAVIS • IRVINE • LOS ANGELES • RIVERSIDE • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO



SANTA BARBARA • SANTA CRUZ

COLLEGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94720

March 18, 1977

Mrs. Lorraine Forestiere
5021 West Shaw
Fresno, California 93711

Dear Mrs. Forestiere:

I am writing to express thanks from the four of us who visited the underground house and gardens last Sunday as guests of you and your husband. I would like to be of assistance to you in bringing to Baldesari Forestiere's environment the kind of care and attention it deserves. Please feel free to use this letter as testimony to the value of the gardens in architectural terms. It has great potential educationally regarding both history and energy conservation. Aesthetically, and as a biography it is inspirational.

I hope to find out more from my colleagues about what the College of Environmental Design could do to help support the gardens and will let you know what I learn. In the meantime if we can help in any way, please feel free to let us know. I can be reached by mail at this address or by phone at (415) 642-4942 or (415) 658-9330.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Galen Cranz".

Galen Cranz, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
of Sociology in Architecture

GC:mm

CREATIVE RESPONSES TO THE ITALIAN AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE IN CALIFORNIA: BALDASSARE
FORESTIERE'S "UNDERGROUND GARDENS" AND
SIMON RODIA'S "WATTS TOWERS"

BY

*KENNETH SCAMBRAY
UNIVERSITY OF LA VERNE*

REPRINT FROM
THE ITALIAN AMERICAN REVIEW
Volume 8 • Number 2
Autumn/Winter 2001

Ω

Creative Responses to the Italian Immigrant Experience in California: Baldassare Forestiere's "Underground Gardens" and Simon Rodia's "Watts Towers"

*Kenneth Scambray
University of La Verne*

Baldassare Forestiere's Underground Gardens and Simon Rodia's Watts Towers are two works of "grassroots art" that express the conflicted and often bifurcating experience of Italian immigration to America. Under a ten-acre parcel of land in rural north Fresno, California, Baldassare Forestiere (1879-1946) dug over one hundred underground tunnels and rooms where he lived throughout his life. While living in suburban Watts near Los Angeles from 1921 to 1954, Simon Rodia (1879-1965) built three towers reaching over eighty feet surrounded by numerous other forms all enclosed by a six-foot wall. He decorated his towers, forms, and walls with broken glass, pottery, shells, and other artifacts that he scavenged from the neighborhood and landscape around him in Southern California.

For over fifty years, the Underground Gardens and Watts Towers have been unjustifiably viewed in isolation from their respective local environments and from their place in the Italian immigrant experience. Scholars' disagreement over the use of the term "folk art" has further complicated the understanding of the two works. Folk art historian Holly Metz used the term "grassroots art" to describe Rodia's Watts Towers in her December 2000 presentation at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute.¹ In the notes to her article, "Where I Am Going: Kea's Ark, Newark, New Jersey," Metz explains that in the late 1960s "term warfare" erupted over the names used to describe what has conventionally been called "folk art." She prefers the term "grassroots art" because it is more descriptive: "self-taught artists' environments are located at the grassroots level, . . . rural, suburban, and urban areas."² Metz's definition of "grassroots art" applies accurately to the suburban and rural sites of Forestiere's and Rodia's works, as well as to the two immigrants' lack of formal artistic or architectural education. As engineer Bud Goldstone and co-author Arloa Paquin

Goldstone explain in *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, “expert observers” have variously described Rodia’s work as “outsider art,” “nonacademic art,” “assemblage construction,” “folk art,” “fine art,” and “architecture,” as well as “sculptures,” “buildings,” and an “above-ground, mini-archaeological dig.”³ While there is no full-length study on Forestiere’s Underground Gardens, what little that has been written on him focuses on his personality rather than on the form of his Underground Gardens and its historical antecedents. No one has brought these two remarkable works together as illuminating expressions of the Italian immigrant experience. In part, by referring to the corpus of Italian American literature, this paper will show how these works express in their individual forms their dual impulse between a recollection of Italy and a hope for success in America. The works of Italian American writers such as Pascal D’Angelo, Garibaldi Lapolla, Jerre Mangione, Jo Pagano, John Fante, and scores of others illustrate that Italian peasants’ immigration provided an escape from their feudal conditions to what they hoped would be the opportunities of a new social order. As D’Angelo narrates in his autobiography, *Son of Italy*, assimilation into American culture was not a simple, uncomplicated process. Italian American literature tells us that immigration has been a bifurcating experience, leaving not only the immigrant but even later generations lodged between two worlds: the idealized recollections of the past in Italy and the New World experience.⁴

Adjustment for Italian immigrants became a complex process that included at the same time the adaptation of Old World culture in the new land and assimilation into New World society.⁵ But recollections of the past and settlement in the New World were not often easily reconcilable for the immigrant or even later generations.⁶ Together, the iconography of Rodia’s towers and Forestiere’s grottoes expresses the tension between hope and memory that is central to the bicultural, immigrant experience. As Jerre Mangione wrote about his relatives in *Mount Allegro*, they liked to tell stories about Italy, “a past they had long ago romanticized,” in spite of the poverty they left behind.⁷ Forestiere’s life and Underground Gardens articulate in their form the conflict between the past and present, while Rodia’s life and his Watts

Towers more successfully merge that past with his hope for a better life in Southern California. Neither the Underground Gardens, nor the Watts Towers can be fully appreciated without an understanding of the heritage, geography, and communities that influenced the lives of Baldassare Forestiere and Simon Rodia.

Baldassare Forestiere's "Underground Gardens"

Baldassare Forestiere was born July 8, 1879 in Filari, a small village in the Peloritani Mountains in the Province of Messina. Baldassare's father owned an olive factory and adjacent groves, which provided a reliable income for the Forestiere family. However, his tyrannical father, Rosario, was unwilling to share his economic resources with his four sons, Antonio, Baldassare, Giuseppe, and Vincenzo.⁸ Unable to foresee any opportunity for himself within his father's business or elsewhere in Sicily, in 1902, at the age of twenty-one Baldassare emigrated, along with his older brother, Antonio, to America.⁹

Having lived until adulthood in his native village, he traveled to America with vivid memories of Sicily. The familiar sites of his ancestral village were replaced in a fortnight by the industrial cityscape of urban America. His resentment towards his father would be softened by time and distance, but it would never be forgotten.¹⁰ Upon their arrival in New York, Baldassare and Antonio worked as "sandhogs" on the Holland Tunnel and Croton Aqueduct in New York and later on the Boston subways.¹¹ By 1906, he and his brother quit their jobs in the East and traveled to Fresno. For a period of time, Baldassare left Fresno and worked grafting fruit trees in a Sicilian community of farm laborers on the Ventura County coast.¹² After three years of living frugally and saving his money, Baldassare returned to the San Joaquin Valley and purchased a ten-acre plot of land in north Fresno. Though the dry, semi-arid climate of the valley contrasted with the mild climate of his native Filari, Fresno had one major resource that Sicily historically did not provide for its peasants: an abundance of cheap land. Soon after purchasing the parcel, Forestiere built a small, wooden house on the barren land in advance of planting an orchard. He would soon find that the valley heat during the summer in his new home (which he often referred to as his "little sweat house")

made living intolerable. To support himself upon his arrival in Fresno, he worked as a leveler and a grafter for other valley farmers.¹³ However, when Forestiere began planting his own orchard, he soon discovered that approximately twenty-four inches below the topsoil was a thick layer of impermeable hardpan, a concrete-like packed clay that underlies many sections of the valley floor. His land was not suitable for trees. Perhaps the low cost of the acreage should have raised the suspicions of this poor, Sicilian immigrant. Forestiere never planted his orchard. Instead, after work each day, he returned to his small wooden house and began digging his caverns under his isolated ten-acre plot of land near the corner of Shaw and Cornelia Avenues. Forestiere would spend the next forty years, until his death in 1946, living in and digging what would become known as the Underground Gardens.

The stories that circulated within Fresno's Italian community depicted Forestiere as an eccentric. During his lifetime, he became an embarrassment to some, but not all, members of his family. A few of his relatives even urged him to stop digging his grottoes.¹⁴ As word spread of his work on his caverns, local residents in the Italian community were quick to label him the "human mole," a term that has unfortunately come to characterize his life to a wider public.¹⁵ But the reality is that Forestiere's life was in many respects similar to that of most Italian immigrants, both in what he accomplished in his over forty years as a successful farmer in the San Joaquin Valley and what his remarkable Underground Gardens expresses to us today.

Reported, but not understood, in all the accounts on Forestiere's life is the fact that he owned more than a thousand acres of prime valley farmland when he died.¹⁶ Over the years Forestiere bought and farmed two vineyards, one near the corner of Shaw and Polk Avenues and the other farther east in the equally remote farming community of Clovis, where he had a small house, which he never permanently inhabited. He also purchased a 640 acre section of land in the foothills of Coalinga on the far west side of the valley.¹⁷ To reach that land he took flying lessons, which he never completed, at what was then known as Furlong Field on Shaw Avenue not far from his Underground Gardens.¹⁸ In other words, like nearly all hard-working Italian immigrants, as a young man Forestiere

intended, in the words of Gennaro Accuci in *The Grand Gennaro*, “to make America.”¹⁹ What has never been fully appreciated by Forestiere’s critics is that by the end of his life he had, indeed, achieved the immigrants’ version of the American Dream.

Forestiere lived a relatively isolated life.²⁰ Settling in the far north end of Fresno, he was far removed from the Italian community located approximately ten miles southwest of him in the immigrant neighborhood known as the West Side. Thus, he did not share in that ethnic solidarity known as “campanilismo” or “regionalismo,” which characterized the experiences of most Italian immigrants in America at the time.²¹ Even so, he visited with his brothers, Antonio and Giuseppe, and their families. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, he would interrupt his digging to take his nephews and nieces to films.²² Though he did not regularly attend church with the other Italians at St. Alphonsus Church in Fresno’s West Side neighborhood, he went to Mass occasionally, and he was vigilant in paying his respects to the families of his friends who died over the years. His success as a farmer allowed him to purchase a car that enabled him to travel the long distance to his Coalinga property and to visit his brothers’ homes.²³

The landscape surrounding both his developing Underground Gardens and his vineyards east of him was populated with only isolated farmhouses and scattered settlements, such as Clovis. Between the vineyards and groves, only an occasional farmhouse dotted the landscape, which stretched uninterruptedly to the towering Sierra Nevada Mountains north and east of the valley. The predictable layer of clouds overhanging the valley that shut out the sun and the valley’s infamous low-lying tule fog during Fresno’s frigid winter months cast a funereal pall over the landscape for days and even weeks on end. As a result, hoarfrost covered the ground and lasted often throughout the day. The summer months, on the other hand, brought a scorching, oppressive heat with temperatures that often exceeded 100 degrees. Accustomed to the coastal temperatures of his native Filari, and the Ventura County coastline where he first settled, Forestiere complained that the valley heat “burned your ears off.”²⁴ Nevertheless, he was intent upon “making America.” As a farmer, he did succeed, no doubt beyond his wildest dreams. At the same time, those

memories of Sicily he carried with him to America and unknown to even his closest friends and relatives, began to take shape slowly in the form of his misunderstood tunnels and grottoes.

After nearly twenty years' of work in his vineyards and on his grottoes, Forestiere still harbored strong memories of his boyhood and young manhood in Filari. In 1928 he made a return trip to his native village. To his friends and relatives he had expressed some ambivalence about his life in America and had told them that he was considering moving back permanently to Sicily. Some of his relatives believed that he would never return.²⁵ But apparently he was disappointed in what he found in Filari. Forestiere returned to Fresno to finish the process he had begun in his vineyards and in his Underground Gardens.

By day, he worked hard in his vineyards. In the late afternoon, he returned by traveling west down Shaw Avenue, a narrow country road in those days, to his underground dwellings to relax and continue his digging.²⁶ Together, his vineyards and his tunnels served as meaningful icons that expressed both his new social position in America society and his recollections of his life in Filari. In the literature of the period, the conflict between the remembered Old World and the contemporary New World experiences in an immigrant character's life resulted sometimes in eccentric behavior and even at times in a tragic end. In *The Grand Gennaro*, Davido Monterano can never fully assimilate into life in America and goes mad in the end. "He could never be an American," the Calabrian immigrant, Gennaro Accuci, says.²⁷ Gennaro, in spite of his great success in the real estate and junk businesses in Harlem, for many years had refused to remove his earrings, symbols for him of his peasant past. Likewise, while Forestiere dug his grottoes, he continued to live in his Sicilian past as he worked in his vineyards.

The story of what was absent in Forestiere's bachelor life is important to the form of his grottoes. He was aware of local and national events and did have contact with Armenian, Japanese, and Italian farmers in the valley's sparsely populated countryside. During World War II and the internment of Italians and Japanese on the west coast, Forestiere commented, "How can I become a citizen of a country that imprisons its own people."²⁸ But he was isolated from the West Side Italian community that served as an

important gateway for immigrant Italians into assimilated life in America. The streets in West Fresno were lined with two-bedroom clapboard and stucco bungalows, many of which boasted electricity or gas lighting and indoor plumbing.²⁹ Besides Italians, this vibrant community included Armenians, Slovaks, Bohemians, Mexicans, Greeks, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, Gypsies, and African Americans.³⁰ Yet he lived a geographically separate life from the Italian community and never became a part of that homogenizing process that made separate regional and dialect groups "Italian" once they settled in America.³¹ There were small settlements near the corner of Shaw and Golden State Boulevard (now Highway 99) where he could purchase supplies. But he was far from those *paesani* in West Fresno who had begun their ascent up the social ladder.

By day, Forestiere worked in his remote vineyards. Each night after work, he descended and dug with his pick and shovel. Their muted scraping against the valley's loamy subsoil below the thick layer of hardpan was the only sound that accompanied him in his isolated life underground. He explained to his relatives that his project was his relaxation after a hard day in his vineyards.³² In his imagination he took the religious and secular forms — arches and grottoes — of his remembered Sicily and recreated them in his tunnels. Forestiere's grottoes became for him the private world of his past, which he would inhabit nearly exclusively until his death in 1946.

While Forestiere's life underground may appear eccentric to his observers, his grottoes have cultural and historical antecedents in Sicily. In the first place, in ancient Greek myth, many of its gods and demigods lived underground and in grottoes, some even under the sea. The fabled giant shepherds, the Cyclopes, from Homer's *Odyssey*, lived in caves, where Odysseus in his efforts to return home encountered Polyphemus. In other versions of the legend, Cyclopes lived in the bowels of Mt. Etna, where they forged Zeus' thunderbolts.³³ In Sicily these legends formed part of the general cultural milieu of peasants, as well as land-owning *latifundi*, who learned these tales in school. The region that surrounds Forestiere's native village also contains many underground dwellings and structures. The hillsides near the village of Rometta

Marea, for example, contain a vast number of Saracen caves in which he and his brothers played as children.³⁴ Dating from the ninth century, when the Arabs invaded and colonized Sicily, these caves, dug out of the limestone cliffs, served originally as storage depots for food and armaments, as well as housing for Saracen soldiers. As late as the nineteenth century, these caves provided storage for grain and shelter for shepherds tending their flocks on the remote hillsides.³⁵ South of Messina, Syracuse contains a plethora of catacombs, grottoes, sepulchers, and mines. Over the centuries these underground structures have been used as prisons, garrisons, work places, and domestic dwellings.

Certain aspects of the Underground Gardens bear a resemblance to the catacombs of San Giovanni in Syracuse. The catacombs' "conic-tapered *venturi*" constructed for light and to enhance airflow are remarkably similar to the skylight openings that Forestiere designed in his chambers.³⁶ Just as important, the asymmetrical pattern of Forestiere's tunnels and grottoes reflects as well the sometimes "confusing geometry" of the San Giovanni catacombs.³⁷ Further, in the late nineteenth century, when Sicily's sulfur mining industry employed nearly two hundred and fifty thousand people, many miners, including entire families, lived in "underground grotto[e]s."³⁸ In his youth, Forestiere was adventuresome. Sleeping wherever he could, he would disappear for days in his explorations of the surrounding hillsides and neighboring towns and villages.³⁹

Though his relentless labor underground embarrassed some of his relatives, he did not always work alone. His younger brother, Giuseppe, helped him dig sections of his tunnels and even completed the roofing of the largest space after Baldassare's death.⁴⁰ Giuseppe and his son "Ric" often visited "Badassu," as they called him in their dialect, in his caverns.⁴¹ As an immigrant who shared his brother's recollections of their native village, Giuseppe had no reservations about the significance of Baldassare's grottoes.

In other areas of the United States, there are Italian immigrant sites reminiscent of the Underground Gardens. The religious iconography of Forestiere's grottoes is unmistakable. He dug a small, unadorned chapel with a diminutive altar carved into one wall. In addition, within his domed grottoes, niches, plants, and

decorations are often arranged in the religiously significant numbers of three, seven, and twelve. What has always distinguished other chapels and religious grottoes from Forestiere's is they were communal efforts: architectural narratives that express the aspirations, ideas, and identity of the entire community. Joseph Sciorra writes, when describing an elaborate shrine to the Madonna, built in the Italian immigrant community of Rosebank, Staten Island, in the late 1930s, "There is no single person or community of people that speaks authoritatively for the [Rosebank] site, but a polyphony of overlapping voices that contribute to the shrine's symbolic meanings(s)."⁴² While Forestiere's vernacular "shrine" may be an expression of one man, it is also at the same time located in the Italian immigrant experience in North America. Though settled permanently in America, Forestiere could never forget his heritage and the village he left behind in Sicily.

His first task, as any San Joaquin Valley farmer or even gardener knew, was to break through the valley hardpan. Impermeable to water, the hardpan served as a natural roof for his tunnels and grottoes. He opposed the use of dynamite, used by many valley farmers, as too destructive and uncontrollable for his purposes.⁴³ To accomplish the daunting task of breaking through the hardpan, not just once but many times to ventilate his caverns and to bring light to the garden trees and other ornamental vegetation he planted, Forestiere used only a pick, shovel, and wheel barrow.

Over the entire project, Forestiere's expenses for building materials amounted little more than three hundred dollars, most of which was for cement.⁴⁴ Otherwise, he constructed his arches and supported his walls out of the hardpan that he dug from the valley floor. By hand he carved thousands of hardpan "bricks" into the appropriate sizes and shapes needed for his beautifully crafted arches and tunnels. In the forms of his arches, niches, and dome-shaped rooms, Forestiere displayed his remarkable skills as a mason and imagination as an artist. He became more skilled with his tools as his work progressed. His "style" began to change in the manner in which he decorated chambers and walls and shaped his arches with his handcrafted "bricks."⁴⁵ To control the winter rains, he constructed a series of underground cisterns and carefully sloped

the floors of his tunnels to capture runoff.⁴⁶ Before he died Forestiere excavated approximately one hundred rooms or chambers.⁴⁷

Forestiere's intuition was his only guide in designing his tunnels. He once said, "The visions in my mind almost overwhelm me."⁴⁸ His nephew "Ric" Forestiere reported that his uncle would scratch out the next phase of his work on the dirt floor of one of his chambers, study it for a moment, and then shout, "*Singulare come il mare!* [Unique like the sea]."⁴⁹ As he said about his grottoes' organization, "It takes no genius to make a straight line. Tie a string to the nose of a jackass and let him walk away. You and the jackass have made a straight line. But to make something crooked and beautiful . . . that is a wonderful thing."⁵⁰ This is precisely what Forestiere's retrospective imagination accomplished in his Underground Gardens. His arches and vaulted ceilings must be interpreted as both structural elements and as cultural expressions.

There are parallels to the form his tunnels took in other parts of North America. As Luisa Del Giudice writes in "The 'Archvilla': An Italian Canadian Architectural Archetype," the arch became a predominant architectural motif throughout Toronto's Italian Canadian Community after World War II. Where there were arches, there were Italians. The arch became an iconographic representation of the past for this community. Among other points, Del Giudice examines "the sources and meaning of the arch as the archetypal architectural expression of Italian ethnicity [which] largely derive[s] from the collective wisdom of his folk patrimony."⁵¹ Though the Underground Gardens occupy a physical space, Forestiere's chambers do not represent the *real* space of public architecture, designed simultaneously to serve a utilitarian function and to make a public statement. His grottoes represent his personal recollections of his Sicilian past, those catacombs, mines, and Saracen caves that surrounded his native village.⁵²

Forestiere's grottoes have both practical and aesthetic dimensions. He devoted the first ten years to excavating his living quarters. To escape the searing summer heat, he fashioned a kitchen with a properly vented wood-burning stove, a chamber with two beds, and finally a living room.⁵³ Adjacent to his living quarters,

he constructed what he called the "Sunrise Plaza," designed to capture the morning sun. The "Sunrise Plaza" also contains a small fishpond in which Forestiere placed fish, which he caught in the nearby rivers and lakes, until he was ready to eat them.⁵⁴ One bed was adjacent to a window that overlooks the "Sunrise Plaza" and was designed to let in the light and warmth of the spring and summer months. During the long valley winter months when bright sunlight was less frequent and valley temperatures plummeted, he slept in his winter bed, which was located deep inside the bedchamber and closer to the stove. He also dug a room for the storage and production of wine and cheese and the curing of meat, important aspects of the Sicilian culture he had left behind in Filari. In the evenings throughout the year, when he was not digging in the dark recesses of his caverns, he was able to rest comfortably in his living quarters and work on his English by reading an occasional newspaper by kerosene lantern.⁵⁵

Beyond his living quarters, he continued for the next thirty years to dig approximately ninety more grottoes. The ten barren acres under which he dug his Underground Gardens became a place of refuge, even from his expansive vineyards. His underground home became "a place representing a simpler and more harmonious life."⁵⁶ Though he labored for long hours during the day as a farmer, Forestiere replicated a garden to recall yet another aspect of the Sicily he remembered. Since the ninth century and the Arabic invasion of Sicily, the island has been idealized as the Mediterranean's "garden paradise." On the land surrounding Palermo, which became known as the "*conca d'oro*," the Arabs introduced the first lemon and citrus groves, as well as a variety of other fruits and nuts.⁵⁷ However, by the end of the nineteenth century, in both agricultural productivity and diversity of crops, the province of Messina had surpassed Palermo.⁵⁸ His father's property surrounding the olive factory was planted with a large olive grove.⁵⁹ This is the Sicily that he wished to recreate in his Underground Gardens.

At selected spots throughout his grottoes, Forestiere cut round holes in the ceiling for light for the lemon, orange, tangerine, lime, and grapefruit trees he had planted in many parts of the underground gardens. The horticultural knowledge he acquired as a farmer served

him well in the creation of his gardens. Forestiere grafted one tree with as many as eight different varieties of fruit. The conical shape of the skylights allowed for an increase flow of air and controlled the entrance of rainwater.⁶⁰ Forestiere's clever engineering and design of the skylights and the planters constituted an efficient drainage and irrigation system. The skylights funneled rainwater into the planters, thus irrigating the trees and preventing flooding in the chambers and tunnels.⁶¹ His plants also benefited from the grottoes' ambient temperature, which varied little more than ten degrees throughout the year.⁶²

Forestiere dug an "Aquarium Chamber" filled with fish, with an "Aquarium Viewing Chamber" where observers could view the fish above through glass covering an opening in the bottom of the pond. In the "Boat Planter" grotto, he constructed a planter in the shape of a boat to recall his own, and millions of other immigrants,' passage to America. The elaborate labyrinth of tunnels led also to an "Auto Tunnel," actually an open-air space where Forestiere parked his car. To complement his "Sunrise Patio," he created the "Sunset Patio" on the west end of the grottoes. The approximately thirty-square-foot space, open to the sun, has a central planter that contained originally an orange tree that Forestiere had grafted with grapefruits, kumquats, and lemons. In the center of the planter, he planted three grape vines. At the far west end of the Gardens, below ground level and directly adjacent to the grottoes, Forestiere planted another, larger garden with an assortment of fruit trees, vines, and decorative plants.

Forestiere completed his tunnels and grottoes with a "room" one hundred feet long and thirty-five feet wide. Some have called this an auditorium or a dance hall.⁶³ No one is certain what Forestiere intended. The "room" contrasts with the intimate nature of the rest of the chambers. But observers of the "room" fail to take into account that originally there was no roof on the space. After Forestiere's death, Giuseppe, who scavenged the trusses from an abandoned airplane hanger at a local airfield, added the roof, windows, and flooring.⁶⁴ Without the roof, it can be read as one more iconic representation of an important aspect of the life that Forestiere left behind him in Sicily: the communal life of Filari. In Forestiere's Underground Gardens, it serves as the "piazza," the

place of communal gathering inaccessible to Forestiere in America. Shortly after arriving in America, Forestiere and his brothers began working in the tunnels and subways of New York and Boston. Their social and cultural dislocation could not have been more extreme. They were thousands of miles from the community life based on family, friends, and ritual feast days. The large, open-air public space recalled a sense of family and community that he missed both in Sicily and Fresno. For Forestiere, like the underworld that he created for himself, comradeship and community remained idealized notions. The real space of his "piazza" was never filled with the community that it represented.

The interplay between light and darkness is a central feature of the Underground Gardens. Between the hours of nine in the morning and three in the afternoon, sunlight shines through the skylights of the various grottoes and permeates the "Sunrise Patio," the "Sunset Patio," and the larger garden area on the west end of the Gardens. From late spring to late autumn in Fresno, before the shortened winter days and fog returns to the valley, throughout the grottoes there is a contrasting display of sunlight and shadows. The Underground Gardens have a monastic-like atmosphere conducive to retrospection. Yet they also capture, at least for part of the day and part of the year, the light of the countryside surrounding them. The contrast between light and darkness characterizes Baldassare Forestiere's inner and outer life. At night he dug his grottoes, recalling his past, and by day, as a successful valley farmer in Fresno, he labored in the full sun of his vineyards.

Forestiere's retrospective arches and gardens express that contrast between the Old World and the New World. Isolated in a dry valley in the extreme edge of the North American continent, he recreated a part of that Sicily of his youth. But for the Italian immigrant, the past can also represent discord and hardship. The problematic nature of the past is a seminal theme that runs throughout Italian American literature. While Forestiere dug, hauled, carved, and built to reconstruct his Gardens, he was also expressing, paradoxically, that other impulse to escape from the bitter aspects of his past. As Gennaro's rebellious son, Emilio, says in *The Grand Gennaro*, what past should the Italian immigrant recall: "The Roman past and the past of the sixteenth century? Or

the past of their miserable enslavement? Or the past of their recent history—the betrayal of Garibaldi and the republican hopes of Mazzini?”⁶⁵ Similarly, Jo Pagano writes in *Golden Wedding* that his Simone family before coming to America had lived for centuries “in a condition that amounted to feudal serfdom.”⁶⁶ Baldassare and his brother left Italy to escape that patriarchal order that his oppressive father represented. He would never be able to build a home and independent life for himself in Filari. While his vineyards recalled the labor of his past and even created for Forestiere another kind of serfdom, his grottoes were his castle: “*In casa sua ciascuno è re.*”⁶⁷ His grottoes allowed him to live comfortably between two worlds: the world of his San Joaquin Valley vineyards in which he successfully set out “to make America” and his memories of Sicily.

Simon Rodia's Watts Towers

The Watts Towers is as much a story about Italians in Southern California as it is about Simon Rodia, the Italian immigrant who built them. Forestiere's solitary life and Underground Gardens in many respects contradicted the communal lives of Fresno Italians at the time. Rodia's life and towers, on the other hand, more positively reflect the immigrant experience in Southern California and ultimately the experiences of most Italian immigrants throughout America at mid-century. Though the immigrant assimilation process was often presented as problematic in the works of such Italian American writers as Pascal D'Angelo, Antonia Pola, and Pietro Di Donato, western Italian American writers such as Angelo Pellegrini, Jo Pagano, and John Fante generally expressed hope and optimism in their works. The dramatization of immigrants' and their offspring's pursuit of the American dream in Italian American literature contrasted with the theme of alienation expressed by those members of the Lost Generation who had exiled themselves to Europe out of protest over what they perceived to be the parochialism of American culture. In fact, Pagano in *Golden Wedding*, parodied the “fatuous, over-indulged prima donnas” of the 1920s, including, presumably, their anti-democratic, caustic oracle, H. L. Mencken.⁶⁸ Looking back to the pre-World War period, Angelo Pellegrini wrote that

for many immigrants "economic gain is no more than marginal relevance" in their struggle for success. For him in Seattle, Washington, throughout the twenties and thirties the American dream was "the inalienable right to seek happiness in self-realization."⁶⁹ Similarly, writers such as Pagano and Fante would depict the problems of assimilation but ultimately celebrate the personal freedom and democratization of life in Southern California for Italian immigrants and their offspring.⁷⁰ For both Pagano and Fante, California was not the terminus, geographical or otherwise, of the American Dream.⁷¹ In *Golden Wedding* Pagano's characters are on a New World quest that takes them beyond the traditional concepts of the family and gender roles. As a Southern California writer, Pagano tells us that his characters' experiences were "a part of that glittering, reckless world of the future, a world whose history was a history of light."⁷² Rodia's towers reflect this same optimistic spirit that is expressed by the writers of the period, including a very creative use of "light."

One of four children, Rodia was born in 1879 into a poor peasant family in Ribottoli, Campania, a village with few resources. Rodia followed an older brother in 1894 to Philadelphia where he began his American odyssey. Over the next fifteen years he moved from northern California to the southwestern United States and back to California, where in 1917 he settled in Long Beach. In 1921 he relocated again when he bought a small house on 107th Street in the Watts section of Los Angeles, at the time a largely Mexican immigrant neighborhood.⁷³ Impetuous and difficult to get along with, he divorced his third and last wife shortly after moving to Watts. Alone but not isolated in his community, Rodia worked for the next thirty-four years on his towers. Employed in a Santa Monica tile factory, he came home each night and worked on his towers. Then one day in 1955, inexplicably, he simply abandoned them. He gave the property to a neighbor and moved to Martinez, California.⁷⁴

Like Forestiére's relatives and acquaintances, Rodia's neighbors thought that he was eccentric. People called him crazy, and children even tormented him as he worked over the years on what would ultimately become seventeen structures. He named his site *Nuestro Pueblo*. One day when asked what that meant,

Rodia's only answer was "Lotsa things, lotsa things."⁷⁵ Once he was asked why he built the towers, and he answered whimsically that his wife was buried under the tallest tower.⁷⁶ His evasiveness is not surprising, any more than the evasiveness of nearly all artists or writers over the meaning of their creative productions. I would suggest that the meaning of the towers lies in Rodia's life in Los Angeles and what this experience came to mean not only for him, but also for most Italian immigrants at the time, especially those in Southern California.

His last two marriages were to Mexican women, which was typical of Italian immigrant men in Los Angeles and the Southwest where Italians were wont to embrace Mexican culture.⁷⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that Rodia would apply a Spanish, not Italian, name to his site. Furthermore, Rodia's travels and experiences before he reached Los Angeles are important aspects of his life that influenced the creation of his towers. Emigrating from his Italian village at age fifteen, he stopped first in Pennsylvania where his brother had settled a few years before.⁷⁸ In 1902 he moved to Seattle, and by 1905 he and his first wife moved to the Italian immigrant neighborhood in Oakland, California.⁷⁹ At some point during this period, Rodia worked on the railroad. This experience took him physically and intellectually outside the ghettoized boundaries of the neighborhood, so typical of that western Italian American experience.⁸⁰ His work on the railroad introduced him to the expansiveness and diversity of the New World and suggested to him its limitless possibilities. He often spoke of the cities he visited, from Berkeley and Cheyenne to Chicago, Denver, and El Paso, while working on the railroad.⁸¹ For immigrants at the time in the West, opportunity would find itself firmly buckled to the immigrant work ethic, and together they would suggest possibilities never before dreamed of by Italian peasants.⁸² As Pellegrini wrote of his family's experiences in the Northwest near Seattle, the undeveloped land and the abundant resources were theirs "at no cost other than the sweat of their brows."⁸³

Though he lived among other Italian immigrants in towns such as Oakland for short periods of time, Rodia remained a free and independent individual. As nineteenth-century Italian immigrant Antonio Gallenga wrote in his autobiography, *Episodes in My Life*,

the Italian immigrant in America should have “no repining or hankering after things he left behind in the old one. He must start with a stout determination to be a settler among settlers; to do in America as the Americans do.”⁸⁴ Conversely, while Rodia’s migratory pattern of life indicates that he certainly set out to succeed, he would not do it at the expense of his Italian identity.⁸⁵ For Italian immigrants and their offspring in America, social and economic mobility did not always override other cultural values.⁸⁶ As Pellegrini wrote, the immigrant “should forget about economic gain and concentrate on becoming something — the best that is latent in us.”⁸⁷ Rodia would never become rich, but he would make the past present in an timeless work of “grassroots art” that would be a fitting tribute, in Pellegrini’s words, to the “immigrant’s quest” for that less tangible side of the American Dream.

When he finally settled in Los Angeles, Rodia found a landscape as limitless as the rest of the country he had visited. By the twenties, Los Angeles and its extensive valleys to the east (San Gabriel, Pomona, Coachella, and Imperial) had become a diverse region settled by a variety of ethnic groups, Italians among them.⁸⁸ In the magazines of the period, Southern California, with its moderate climate, was promoted as a Mediterranean culture.⁸⁹ At the time of Rodia’s settlement in Watts, demographically the Los Angeles basin and its environs had “taken on the traits of the nation as a whole”⁹⁰ As Frank Lloyd Wright said, “It’s as if you tipped the United States up so all the commonplace people slid down here into southern California.”⁹¹ Lincoln Heights was only one of the many Italian neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The *Fratellanza Garibaldina* established a meeting hall on Olivera Street, where it remains today.⁹² Pagano wrote that Japanese immigrants dominated the fruit and vegetable trade in the Grand Terminal Market on Third Street, which also included Italian merchants. In his Los Angeles novels Fante described the Mexican, Filipino, and Chinese businesses that dominated the Plaza, once the historic center of Los Angeles. By the 1930s, Pagano explained that Third and Broadway had become “the real beginning of the modern city of Los Angeles, which through the years, had spread south and westward.” Then the hub of the metropolis shifted again and the corner of Seventh Street and Broadway became “the center

of the city, and one of the busiest corners in the world."⁹³ At the time that Rodia settled in Southern California, Los Angeles was a dynamic, bustling immigrant center.

Change and dispersal characterized the Los Angeles immigrant experience.⁹⁴ Unlike Italian American families before and after World War II in Northeastern urban neighborhoods, in Southern California, they would not inhabit for more than a single generation the same houses and neighborhoods. Italian immigrants moved from the Plaza and Lincoln Heights to towns such as Hacienda Heights, Alhambra, Tustin, and further east yet to the Pomona Valley to such towns as Upland, Ontario, and Cucamonga, where Italians planted the first vineyards and were among the originators of the Southern California wine industry. Before and after World War II, they provided part of the work force for Kaiser Steel in Fontana. Seizing the opportunity that the western experience offered, Italian Americans became involved in an expanding and lucrative real estate market in construction, land speculation, and development.

Rodia's suburban Watts, though remote from bustling downtown Los Angeles, was the transportation hub for the southern half of Los Angeles County. The Pacific Electric Red Car Line connected Rodia's neighborhood with the Watts Depot and Santa Ana.⁹⁵ Japanese produce brokers and Japanese farmers who hawked vegetables at Grand Terminal Market also farmed the land around Watts. Watts was home to German, Jewish, Mexican, and Greek immigrants, as well as African Americans migrating from the South. Rodia's immediate neighborhood was the site of Baptist and Methodist churches, including Macedonia Baptist and African Methodist churches.⁹⁶ In the 1930s each day Rodia, either by car or train, revisited the diverse, spacious Southern California landscape — its mountains, its yet untamed rivers, and seashore — as he traveled to Santa Monica where he worked as a laborer in a tile factory.⁹⁷ California's expansive landscape provided space and opportunity for newcomers to achieve that American dream.

Rodia's Los Angeles is characterized by capacious space and the omnipresence of sunlight. Light played a significant role in Rodia's selection of materials for his towers. He traveled daily through neighborhoods that often contained large open spaces between residential developments and commercial and industrial

sites.⁹⁸ The houses were single-story bungalows that lined quiet, sunny streets. Before World War I, the motion picture industry moved from the Northeast to Hollywood mainly because of the reliability of sunlight in which to do location shooting.⁹⁹ In *Golden Wedding* Pagano used the phrase "history of light" in reference to the reason the motion picture industry moved from the east to Los Angeles.¹⁰⁰ Southern California's varied and sun-drenched landscape, from its beaches and mountains to its deserts, was alluring for an industry that placed all of its stock in the cinematic image.¹⁰¹ Through its films, Hollywood and Southern California in general became something of a metaphor for that universal myth of the American dream.¹⁰² For the nickels it cost to see a movie in the 1920s and 30s, Hollywood's films worked a similar kind of magic for immigrant Italians. They could see all those who had already "made America."

The mythology of success has deep roots in American culture. As one European observer said in the 1920s, "The idea of success is in the blood of the nation, for the nation itself is success — the most gigantic success history has ever recorded."¹⁰³ Likewise, the mythology of success is recorded in Italian American literature, from the eastern works of D'Angelo and Lapolla to the Los Angeles novels of Fante and Pagano. In both their detail and their tall spires, Rodia's towers express his dream of success in America, as well as his recollection of his past.

Light and the abundance of space were central to the form and content of the towers. In 1921 he purchased a house on a wedge-shaped lot with a spacious side yard, like most Southern California residential homes. The capacity to reflect light would be an important aspect of the materials he selected to festoon his seventeen different sculptures, including three towers standing between fifty-five and nearly one-hundred-feet tall. He collected fragments of glass, pop bottles, pottery, cups, plates, automobile glass, window glass, mirrors, bottoms of bottles, teapots and tiles, as well as seashells he gathered during his walks on Southern California beaches. The tiles, whole and fragments, came from a variety of manufacturers in Southern California.¹⁰⁴ He placed these in bins on the site and carefully selected the fragments for their placement. He kept a fire burning on the back of his property where

he melted glass into free forms before he embedded them into the walls of his sculptures.¹⁰⁵ He used household and industrial objects to press designs into his drying mortar, from the backs of ice cream parlor chairs, wire rug beaters, and faucet handles, to gears, iron gates, grills, baskets, and cooking utensils. He poured mortar into cast-iron corn bread bakers, removed the dried mortar, and inserted the panels into his sculptures. On other surfaces he inscribed freehand designs into his wet mortar.¹⁰⁶ Into sections of his exterior wall, he pressed images of his tools — hammers, pliers, and files — signs of his immigrant working class values.

But Rodia's site is not just a random collection of junk. It is a controlled work created from the many carefully selected materials collected from his surroundings.¹⁰⁷ As the Southern California light passes over the multicolored surfaces of his sculptures during the day, it creates a polyphonic luminosity. The combination of free-form glass and tile fragments reflect the Southern California light in harmonic tones and shades. The elongated, arched buttresses that crisscross the site and that also form the round circles on the towers cast a network of changing shadows across the site. Like Southern California around it and like Rodia's own life, the sculptures are not static. They change with the movement and intensity of the sun. Though made of reinforced concrete, the giant towers appear light and airy, more celestial than earth bound.

Just as important, many of the soft drink bottles are placed with their labels showing. The colorful fragments of the cups, saucers, tiles, plates, vases, and utensils are a cross section of the consumer life of the twenties and thirties.¹⁰⁸ The objects that Rodia pressed into his sculptures have their identifiable sources in the community and industries that surrounded him in Southern California. Nevertheless, his sculptures transcend the period in which they were constructed and leave an indelible record of an immigrant mind that went beyond the parochial and the mundane. R. Buckminster Fuller credited Rodia with making innovations in his structural engineering. But Fuller was quick to add that Rodia's innovations were "intuitive" and not just technical.¹⁰⁹ The towers are a masterpiece of "grassroots art" that have permanently captured a record of both the era and the immigrant experience.

While the Towers are the creation of one man, they also express the recollections and hopes of generations of Italian immigrants in the New World. They are the paean of an Italian immigrant to both his past and his life in Southern California. Like Forestiére's Underground Gardens, they express the psychological dislocating experience of immigration. But unlike Forestiére's grottoes, Rodia's towers provide a resolution to the problematic nature of the bicultural experience. Rodia collected the discards of modern America and organized them into a new form. At the same time, his construction, while it represents the present in its accumulation of contemporary artifacts, it also recalls the past.

Folklorists I. Sheldon Posen and Daniel Ward have suggested that Rodia's towers were based on the ceremonial *gigli* (lilies) annually paraded around the town of Nola, not far from his native village, in honor of the local patron saint, St. Paulinus.¹¹⁰ Each year around June 22, on the occasion of the feast honoring St. Paulinus, ceremonial *gigli*, more than six stories high and a ship are paraded around the streets of the town. The ceremony is referred to as the "Dance of the *Gigli*." The bearers of the *gigli* "dance" through the streets to the accompaniment of a lively brass band. Since at least the sixteenth century, the "Dance of the *Gigli*" feast was organized by Nola's eight craft guilds. The *gigli* represent the guilds and the ship symbolizes the return of St. Paulinus after his and other villagers' kidnapping, liberation, and return from captivity during the fifth century. The shape of Rodia's towers, especially the central tower, and the ship are nearly identical copies of the ones carried through the streets of Nola. Rodia named the ship the *Marco Polo* after the great explorer who opened Western culture to a world beyond its borders.

If we look at the immigrant literature of the period, what motivated him becomes as transparent as the iconography of his work. It is remarkable that one man built the towers without help from others or at least assistance from machinery. The Italian immigrants who flooded America at the turn of the century were little more than, in D'Angelo's words, "pick and shovel" laborers.¹¹¹ Even so, in spite of their hardships in the New World, like Pagano's immigrants in *Golden Wedding*, they set out on another kind of voyage. As Lapolla explains in *The Grand Gennaro*, once settled,

immigrants worked with a vengeance to overcome their historical subaltern status in Italy and in America. Lapolla's main character, the Grand Gennaro, pounds his chest and boasts, "I, I made America, and made it quick." Lapolla writes, "if one said of himself that he had made America, he said it with an air of rough boasting, implying 'I told you so' or 'Look at me.'"¹¹² It is often reported that Rodia wanted people to know how hard he had labored. He never failed to point out that he built his towers alone. Rodia was quoted as saying, "I'm gonna do something . . . This is a great country."¹¹³ Once someone showed Rodia a picture of Antonio Gaudí's Church of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Rodia asked, "Did he have helpers?" When he was told a crew of workers had built it, unimpressed, Rodia said, "I did it myself."¹¹⁴

Rodia's creation contrasts in important ways with Forestiere's in Fresno. Though he owned considerable land in the San Joaquin Valley, Forestiere confined himself to a restricted space for his chambers. His one hundred grottoes underlie acres of land. However, spaciousness is not each individual room's major characteristic. The visitor must duck at times to pass through a tunnel, and the majority of the rooms are little more than fifty to one hundred square feet. Forestiere remained isolated underground as he focused on those recollections of his village life in Filari. His signature was the black smudges that his lantern left on the arches of his tunnels. While Forestiere's grottoes are characterized by a combination of seasonal light and darkness, by contrast, Rodia's Towers are bathed daily in total sunlight, which is nearly constant in Southern California. Rodia inscribed his work with a public sign, *Nuestro Pueblo*, an appropriate name considering the Towers' public location in the middle of his suburban, ethnic neighborhood.

Forestiere's and Rodia's creations contrast in their light/dark and public/private dimensions. However, what brings their two works together is that they also represent "home" for the two immigrant wayfarers.¹¹⁵ Forestiere's Underground Gardens narrates for us the interior, private aspect of separation that characterizes all immigrant experiences in America. There is something fundamentally sad about a man who spent the better part of his life underground, recalling a past he could only revisit in his its

derivative forms. But there is also something joyful in the gardens he planted and in his successful efforts to bring the sunlight, if only seasonally, into his underground grottoes and planters. Rodia's sculptures were, as well, expressions of his past. In each case both men narrated in their respective "dialects," their inner turmoil inspired by the bicultural experience of the Italian immigration. Rodia was surrounded by suburban and industrial America; Forestiere was surrounded by a rural landscape. Rodia merged the common images from his regional ceremonial spires with the found objects of modern industrial America. With his hand tools, the pick, shovel, and wheelbarrow, Forestiere used his hardpan "bricks," the most abundant resource he had, to create the arches and gardens of his Sicilian memories. Both men engaged in, what can only be termed, without fear of hyperbole, a Herculean labor. Work was a primary value that immigrant Italians brought with them as peasants to the New World. Rodia's Watts Towers, in their unique decoration with the materials he found around him in Los Angeles, and their soaring heights, speak more eloquently to that dream of success that most immigrants brought to the New World than do Forestiere's retrospective underground arches. Ultimately, both Simon Rodia and Baldassare Forestiere transcended their parochial, subaltern origins in Italy and inscribed a timeless message about the immigrant experience in their unique works.

Notes

- ¹ While Metz uses the term "grassroots art" to describe Rodia's Watts Towers, she explains that the term "grassroots art" has now been replaced by the more recent "outsider art." She points out that her husband and colleague, Bob Foster, continues to use "folk art environments." *Outsider Architectures: Laboratories of the Imaginary*, special issue of *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South*, ed. Frédéric Allamel, No. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 2000/2001). I would like to thank Joseph Sciorra for bringing Metz's presentation at the Calandra Institute and her article to my attention.
- ² *Outsider Architectures: Laboratories of the Imaginary*, 215.
- ³ (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997) 13, 15, & 63. See also Roger Cardinal's *Outsider Art* and William Seitz's *The Art of Assemblage*. The term "nonacademic art" is from John Maizels' *Raw Creation, Outsider Art and Beyond* and is also cited in Goldstone and Goldstone, 108.

- ⁴ Rose Basile Green, *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974).
- ⁵ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 234-64.
- ⁶ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Search for an Italian American Identity: Continuity and Change," in *Italian Americans: New Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. Lydio Tomasi (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1985), 94-95.
- ⁷ *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 204.
- ⁸ Elena Faulks, telephone interviews, July 1998 and 2001. Elena is Baldassare Forestiere's niece and "Ric" Forestiere's sister; Manno, "Forward" 2. Baldassare had five siblings: in their order of birth, Antonio, Baldassare, Giuseppe, Rose, Vincenzo, and Nicolina. Vincenzo settled in Boston and Giuseppe settled in Fresno. After leaving Fresno, Rose lived in northern California, where Elena currently resides. Only Nicolina remained in Italy. Faulks, interview, 2001.
- ⁹ Rosario "Ric" Forestiere, Contribution and Italian translation by Silvio Manno, "In Search of Baldassare: Twelve Days in Sicily," Travel diary 10 Sept. 1999- 21 Sept. 1999 (Unpublished t.s.) 6; Silvio Manno, "Forward: California: Earthly Paradise" (Unpublished t.s.) 2. "Ric" Forestiere, son of Giuseppe and nephew of Baldassare; and the Underground Gardens' docent, Silvio Manno, traveled to Filari in 1999, which has been abandoned and is now in ruins. See also: Andrew Rolle, *The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 34; and Denis Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily: Medieval Sicily 800-1713*, vol. 1; *A History of Sicily: Modern Sicily After 1713*, vol. 2 (New York: Dorset Press, 1968), 499-501.
- ¹⁰ Faulks.
- ¹¹ Manno, "Forward," 2; Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 34.
- ¹² Manno, "Forward," 3.
- ¹³ Manno, "Forward," 3.
- ¹⁴ Manno, "Forward," 24.
- ¹⁵ Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 35; Charles Hillinger, "The Human Mole," *Dream Streets: The Big Book of Italian American Culture*, ed. Lawrence DiStasi. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 21.
- ¹⁶ Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 35.
- ¹⁷ Faulks.
- ¹⁸ Silvio Manno, docent, Underground Gardens, 15 July 2001; Faulks.

- ¹⁹ Garibaldi Lapolla, *The Grand Gennaro* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1935), 63.
- ²⁰ Michael La Sorte, *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 37-60.
- ²¹ Micaela Di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 93-94; Gloria Ricci Lothrop, ed., *Fulfilling the Promise of California: An Anthology of Essays on the Italian American Experience in California* (Seattle: California Italian American Task Force: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2000), 235.
- ²² Faulks.
- ²³ Manno, docent; Faulks.
- ²⁴ Manno, "Forward," 5.
- ²⁵ Faulks.
- ²⁶ Faulks.
- ²⁷ Lapolla, 277.
- ²⁸ Manno, "Forward," 17; Lawrence DiStasi, ed. *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001).
- ²⁹ Josephine Di Filippo Scambray, resident of Fresno 1920-1998, telephone interviews, June-July 1998.
- ³⁰ William Saroyan, *Don't Go but If You Must Say Hello to Everybody* (London: Cassell and Co., 1969), 82-90.
- ³¹ Filippo Salvatore, *Ancient Memories, Modern Identities: Italian Roots in Contemporary Canadian Authors*, trans. Domenic Cusmano (Toronto: Guernica, 1999) 30-31; Di Leonardo, 134.
- ³² Faulks.
- ³³ Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 237-40, 920.
- ³⁴ Forestiere, 12.
- ³⁵ Manno, "Forward," 28-29.
- ³⁶ Forestiere, 3.
- ³⁷ David D. Hume, *About Sicily: Travelers in an Ancient Land* (New Hampshire: J. N. Townsend Publishing, 1999), 141.
- ³⁸ Smith, 475-77.
- ³⁹ Manno, "Forward," 30.
- ⁴⁰ Manno, docent.
- ⁴¹ Manno, "Forward," 24.
- ⁴² Joseph Sciorra, "Multivocality and Vernacular Architecture: "The Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island," in *Studies in Italian American Folklore*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice

- (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1993), 204.
- ⁴³ Manno, docent.
- ⁴⁴ Manno, docent.
- ⁴⁵ Manno, docent.
- ⁴⁶ Teresa Fiore, "Il giardino sotterraneo," *America Oggi* 19 Sept. 1999: 16B; Manno, docent.
- ⁴⁷ Manno, "Forward" 7; Rolle, *The Italian Americans* 34. Recent discoveries adjacent to the Gardens have uncovered more Forestiere grottoes. He also dug a grotto on his Coalinga property (Manno, docent). Since it cannot always be determined where one room or tunnel leaves off and another begins, it is difficult to agree on the exact number of rooms. Manno counts ninety-five rooms.
- ⁵⁸ Manno, "Forward," 15.
- ⁴⁹ Manno, "Forward," 24.
- ⁵⁰ Manno, "Forward," 14.
- ⁵¹ Luisa Del Giudice, "The 'Archvilla': An Italian Canadian Architectural Archetype," *Studies in Italian American Folklore*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1993), 55.
- ⁵² Del Giudice, 53, 55.
- ⁵³ Silvio Manno, "The Forestiere Underground Gardens: A Pictorial Journey, April 1, 2001" (Unpublished t.s.), 1-7.
- ⁵⁴ Manno, docent.
- ⁵⁵ Faulks.
- ⁵⁶ Del Giudice, 61.
- ⁵⁷ Smith, 8.
- ⁵⁸ Smith, 473, 497.
- ⁵⁹ Forestiere.
- ⁶⁰ Manno, "Forward," 23.
- ⁶¹ Manno, docent.
- ⁶² Catherine Morison Rehart, *The Valley's Legends & Legacies* (Fresno: Word Dancer Press, 1996), 189.
- ⁶³ Manno, "The Forestiere," 52.
- ⁶⁴ Manno, docent.
- ⁶⁵ Lapolla, 323.
- ⁶⁶ *Golden Wedding* (1943. New York: Arno Press, 1975), 4.
- ⁶⁷ Del Giudice, 55; "In a home of one's own, each one is king," Del Giudice, 92.
- ⁶⁸ Pagano, 263.
- ⁶⁹ *American Dream* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 5-6.
- ⁷⁰ Lothrop, 259.
- ⁷¹ David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Albuquer-

- que: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 7.
- ⁷² Pagano, 284.
- ⁷³ Goldstone, 27-35.
- ⁷⁴ Goldstone, 84.
- ⁷⁵ Rob Haeseler, "The End of the Line," in *Dream Streets: The Big Book of Italian American Culture*, Lawrence DiStasi, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 18.
- ⁷⁶ Goldstone, 39.
- ⁷⁷ Rosalind Giardina Crosby, "The Italians of Los Angeles, 1900," in *Struggle and Success: An Anthology of the Italian Immigrant Experience in California*, Paola A. Sensi-Isolani and Phyllis Cancilla Martinelli eds. (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1993), 39.
- ⁷⁸ Goldstone, 28.
- ⁷⁹ Goldstone, 29; Di Leonardo, 18.
- ⁸⁰ Lothrop, 235.
- ⁸¹ Haeseler, 18; Goldstone, 31.
- ⁸² Andrew Rolle, "Introduction," *Fulfilling the Promise of California: An Anthology of Essays on the Italian American Experience in California*, Gloria Ricci Lothrop ed. (Seattle: California Italian American Task Force: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2000), 16.
- ⁸³ *American Dream*, 8.
- ⁸⁴ Andrew Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 3. Reprinted as *Westward the Immigrants* (Ninot, Colo: University Press of Colorado, 1999).
- ⁸⁵ Goldstone, 28.
- ⁸⁶ Di Leonardo, 104-6.
- ⁸⁷ *American Dream*, 6.
- ⁸⁸ Crosby, 38-40.
- ⁸⁹ Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised*, 292.
- ⁹⁰ Franklin Walker, *A Literary History of Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 5.
- ⁹¹ Walker, 5.
- ⁹² Crosby, 40-44.
- ⁹³ *Golden Wedding*, 208-9.
- ⁹⁴ Crosby, 41-44.
- ⁹⁵ Goldstone, 80.
- ⁹⁶ Goldstone, 80.
- ⁹⁷ Goldstone, 68.
- ⁹⁸ Crosby, 42-43.
- ⁹⁹ Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (Indianapolis: The

- Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1996), 118.
- ¹⁰⁰ Pagano, 284.
- ¹⁰¹ Mast, 118.
- ¹⁰² Fine, 12-13.
- ¹⁰³ Richard Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1971), 184.
- ¹⁰⁴ Goldstone, 66.
- ¹⁰⁵ Goldstone, 56.
- ¹⁰⁶ Goldstone, 70-74.
- ¹⁰⁷ Goldstone, 18.
- ¹⁰⁸ Goldstone, 64.
- ¹⁰⁹ Goldstone, 50.
- ¹¹⁰ I. Sheldon Posen and Daniel F. Ward, "Watts Towers and the Giglio Tradition," in *Folklife Annual 1985*, Alan Jabbour and James Hardin, eds. (Library of Congress: Washington), 144-45.
- ¹¹¹ Pascal D'Angelo, *Son of Italy* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1924), 66.
- ¹¹² Lapolla, 5.
- ¹¹³ Goldstone, 36.
- ¹¹⁴ Goldstone, 60.
- ¹¹⁵ Goldstone, 19.

Last Rites Are Set For Baldissarie Forestierre, Famed Cave Builder

Funeral rites for Baldissarie Forestierre, 67, a Fresno cave builder, are planned for Thursday at 10 A. M. in the St. Alphonsus Catholic Church. Interment will be in the Holy Cross Cemetery under the direction of the Fresno Funeral Chapel. The rosary will be said tomorrow at 8 P. M. in the funeral chapel.



Forestierre, who died Sunday in a local hospital following an operation, began digging his underground palace in 1908. There are 60 rooms under a five acre tract of land. All are connected by tunnels.

In some of the rooms there are orange, lemon and grapefruit trees while in another section of the grotto is a vegetable garden. Forestierre maintained living quarters underground near the entrance.

Recessed in the walls of most of the rooms are cemented seats. In

Baldissarie Forestierre

the largest room there is practically no ceiling. Grape vines planted in the center spread upward and form a green roof from which hang clusters of grapes.

Forestierre, a native of Italy, came to the United States in 1902. He worked in the subways of Boston for a year and aided in building the Croton Aqueduct and the Holland Tunnel.

He built the caves with the hope he might convert them into a resort. His brother, Joe Forestierre, a Fresno rancher, said the family hopes to keep the caves intact as a scenic attraction.

ato

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Bsc 12-11-46

January 9, 2012

Historic Preservation Commission
City of Fresno

RE: Deny the request of Mary Forestiere to delist 4.41-acre parcel from the Historic designation included within the boundaries of the 8.8-acre parcel.

As a third generation caretaker of the Forestiere Underground Gardens, I have been asked by my father Ric Forestiere to say a few words regarding this request.

On Saturday, January 7th my father, my sister, and I gave a brief tour of those historical resources in an attempt to provide context to my previous letter. Some of those historical resources located within the 4.41-acre parcel include: the old smoke house, the exit stairway to the lake side gallery, the old souvenir shop building, and the site of the lake created by Baldassare Forestiere. As previously submitted, The Fresno Bee article of 1924 confirms the existence of the lake. Attached to this letter, are my fathers recollections of the lake and island. The remains of the island wine cellar may still be buried beneath the soil.

According to the National Register sites need not have physical remains. Even structures that have lost their configuration are considered remains. Also, according to the National Register, sites may include areas of significance solely for activities in past such as battlefields, parks, gardens, etc.

On October 12, 1977 both Ric Forestiere and Joe Forestiere sole owners deeded the entire 10-acre parcel. The authorization reads "The Northeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter in Section 15, Township 13 South, Range 19 East, Mount Diablo Base and Meridian." It goes on to read "it is also the intent of the undersigned owners of the above property to preserve and maintain the premises primarily as a Memorial Estate, and to perpetuate it as a tribute to a spirit of individualism and vision that distinguished so many of our early forebearers".

Perhaps a possible solution may be that the City of Fresno independently or together with a Non-profit organization purchase the 4.41-acre parcel in order to preserve and protect the public interest in this irreplaceable historic treasure.

It does not make sense to remove the Local Historical designation for an "open air market". We respectfully ask that the Historic Preservation Commission deny the request.

Sincerely,



Marc Forestiere

Marc's additional questions:

1. Regarding the scattered buildings, the old souvenir shop was a permanent structure not a mere "fruit stand" as stated in staff's report. It has a cement floor, includes an electrical service panel, and both gas and water lines. The partial destruction this past summer calls into question Mary Forestiere's statement "she also notes that she has no plans to develop the property but is attempting to sell it and wishes to have the historic status removed prior to negotiating a contract (Appendix E)." According to the January 9 staff report "City planning staff has recently met with representatives of the Mary Forestiere family regarding the potential to lease the parcel for use as an "international open air market." **Why does such a use require delisting? Are those plans inconsistent with historic preservation?** To date, my father has never received any documentation called Appendix "E" described within the staff report.
2. I cannot find the basis where staff states in their January 9th revised report "It would appear, however, that the reference to the "Gardens" in both the settlement agreement and the Specific Plan was the portion of the resource that was open to the public for tours, rather than the other assets of the over all site which were not open or safe for tourism" **What is staff basing this opinion on?** The Interlocutory Judgment used "Forestiere Underground Gardens" merely to describe those historical structures that were previously used for tourism. It was needed to describe them to extinguish Joe Forestiere's rights to them because of his claims that he spent money to repair them. It was never intended to state that *all* of the historical resources were located west of the fence line. It was never intended to state that there we no historical remnants/features on the east side that were not open to the public or used for tourism. That erroneous interpretation of the language of the judgment is clearly refuted by the historical documents (articles, insections, etc.) and the evidence of the historical remnants (i.e. stairs, smoke house, souvenir shop, and lake area).
3. My father and I were unaware of the December 12, 2011 meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission. It is my understanding that evidence and testimony was presented by Anthony Forestiere on behalf of his mother Mary Forestiere. I have not had the opportunity to review that evidence and testimony. **How, when, and where can we get access to these documents including Appendix E?** Once contacted, we began to respond. On January 4, 2012, I submitted a letter to this Commission on this subject that included exhibits of the Historical resources of the 4.41-area parcel and a series of questions—that have not yet been answered. **I am not sure what the status is or the procedures for receiving answers., what's next?**

4. The Greenwood map was created as an exhibit used for a court proceeding in the late 1960's. It was incomplete at that time. The Greenwood map was not created to act as the sole document of all Historic Resources on the ten-acre parcel property. Years later Jan Wampler created a more involved map, it too was not intended to be the sole description of all Historical Resources on the entire ten-acre parcel, but instead created for a book that Dr. Wampler was writing and not a "surveyed" map. Today over thirty years later, after numerous levels of protection (local, state, and National), after extensive review of a Specific Plan taken by the Forestiere Family, it is disingenuous to now simply assume that either map was meant to be the sole record of all Historical Resources existing on the entire ten-acre parcel. Is it more credible to believe that the intent of the owners, through their actions, bestowed protections for the entire ten-acre parcel and all of its historical resources, by both Ric Forestiere and Joe Forestiere signing the Historic Easement and granting that to the State of California. On that Easement, just after the legal description, one can read their intent: "It is also the intent of the undersigned owners of the above property to preserve and maintain the premises primarily as a Memorial Estate, and to perpetuate it as a tribute to a spirit of individualism and vision that distinguished so many of our early forebearers".

Good evening, my name is Anthony Forestiere. I am here to represent Mary Forestiere and I want to reply to Marc Forestiere's comments, as provided in the report to the Historic Preservation Commission for their meeting today, January 9, 2012, on Mary's behalf.

In paragraph two of Marc's letter, Marc mentions that "All three protections", the City of Fresno's Local Register of Historic Resources, the National Register of Historic Places, and the California Historical Landmark status, were established between 1977 and 1984. He also states that "In 1998, seven years after a 'partition in kind' judgment, a citizens committee including Joseph and Mary Forestiere added a series of protections through the Highway City Specific Plan." What Marc fails to mention is the following:

1. In September 1981 Mary and Joseph Forestiere had already filed their first lawsuit against Ric and Ric had countersued showing an adversarial relationship had begun which would have made Joseph and Mary seek legal advice before signing any documents as it related to the historical nomination of the Forestiere Underground Gardens after September 1981.
2. Joseph Forestiere signed only one document. That sole document was signed for the sole purpose of allowing for the authorization for the assignment of a number,

registration and erection of a Historical Landmark to the Department of Parks and Recreation for the State of California. At no time did Joseph and/or Mary Forestiere sign anything else for recognition of the property at the National level or at the City of Fresno level.

The Historic Preservation Committee writes that a notice was sent to Ric and Joseph Forestiere to the 5021 W. Shaw Avenue address providing notice that a request was being made to add the Forestiere Underground Gardens to the City's List of Historic Resources. That address was never the address for Joseph Forestiere. It was the address that Ric Forestiere used during his time as the tenant of the Underground Gardens. At no time did Joseph Forestiere use this address for business or personal use. When the City sent the notice to this address, it was never received nor would it have been received by Joseph Forestiere.

Therefore, as far as we are concerned, no notification was sent to Joseph Forestiere allowing him time to dispute the map that was provided in the application to have the Underground Gardens added to the City of Fresno's List of Historic Resources.

3. The Highway City Specific Plan's citizen committee added a series of protections seven years after the Interlocutory

Judgment was filed. The judgment, as submitted earlier, separated the “Forestiere Underground Gardens” from Joseph and Mary’s property. When the Highway City Specific Plan mentions protections for the “Forestiere Underground Gardens”, we believe and contend that they are referring to the western acreage that was given to Ric and not the eastern acreage that was given to Joseph and Mary.

In paragraph three of Marc’s letter, Marc mentions a list of exhibits attached that may aid the Historic Preservation Commission in understanding the additional historic resources on the 4.41-acre parcel. I can only assume Marc is referring to Mary’s property. If he is, he also states that there MAY be other Historic Resources that are not visible above ground. I think this qualifies as an admission by the Ric Forestiere family and his representatives that they themselves are not sure any tunnels or passageways exist on Mary’s side of the property and are only fighting this request in case tunnels and passageways do exist. If they, the Ric Forestiere family and his representatives, were so sure that tunnels and passageways exist on Mary’s property, why did Marc use the word MAY? It is our contention that without concrete evidence they exist, this commission must therefore rely on the map we submitted, prepared by RW Greenwood Associates, as a factual map and not rely on the map prepared by Jan

Wampler from his conversations with Ric Forestiere. We also contend that there is NOT any other Historic Resources that are below ground and not visible from above ground on Mary's property. That being the case, this commission should recommend to the City of Fresno to accept Mary's request to have the boundary moved to incorporate only the Forestiere Underground Gardens, and include only the lake-side stairwell that currently exists on Mary's property thereby removing over 99% of Mary's property from the City of Fresno's List of Historic Resources.

Marc's list continues by including a list of historic resources, including:

A. Old Smoke House Building, and

D. Ric Forestiere hand-drawn map that depicts portions of original lake, not to scale, not complete.

It is our contention that neither of these "supposed historic resources" is an actual "historic resource" for the following reasons:

1. You saw both of those "supposed resources" and the comments I want to make are that the "old smoke house building" referred to by Marc is a stack of rock and cement cinder block that was made by Ric Forestiere prior to the decision by the court to separate ownership of the parcels.

He used this area as a dumping ground for busted and discarded rock and cement cinder blocks. If Ric truly believed that the old smoke house building was a significant resource, why did he pile thousands of pounds of rock and cement cinder blocks on top of this resource?

2. As for the above ground lake, for which you were able to see, that lake was non-existent in the 1950s and 1960s until late 1970s – early 1980s when Ric dug out the supposed lake, based upon his memory of the lake, with a tractor one day during the time he was the tenant. For that reason alone, there cannot be any historical significance since it was created by Ric from his memory and not by Baldassare Forestiere, the reason this historic resource exists in the first place.

As for Marc's list of questions, let me provide a rebuttal to the ones that need clarification.

Question 2 – Mary has never claimed that the Interlocutory Judgment was a “sale”. What Mary contends is that when Judge Henry made his decision to split the property, he effectively split the property in two pieces, the “Forestiere Underground Gardens” and the non-Forestiere Underground Gardens. Judge Henry gave Joseph and Mary the eastern part of the parcel which contained **NO Underground Gardens** and gave Ric the parcel containing **ALL of the “Forestiere**

Underground Gardens". Our interpretation of that decision is that any historical status that was placed upon the "Forestiere Underground Gardens" was attached to Ric's parcel under his ownership and that none of Joseph and Mary's property was to be included as historical since none of the underground gardens was included on their parcel.

Question 3. If you effectively move the boundary to exclude Mary's 4.41 acres from the List of Historic Resources, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) would no longer have any bearing on Mary's property and therefore there would be no effect on CEQA.

Question 4. As per my discussion with Jay Correia of the California Parks and Recreation Office of Historic Preservation, he mentioned that there exist no provisions at the national level to protect historic resources, only at the state and local levels. Therefore, the National Environmental Policy Act is not applicable.

Question 5 – There are no other "below-ground" historic resources on Mary's property. Marc is speculating that they exist but hasn't provided any proof, other than a disputed map by Jan Wampler that was drawn from Ric's memory, not Baldassare's. In addition, Marc's comment from earlier that there **MAY** be historic resources under Mary's 4.41 acres

provides clear evidence that the Ric Forestiere family and his representatives are speculating that something exists of a historical nature to which we vehemently deny exist.

Question 6 – Once the 4.41 acres is removed from the City's List of Historic Resources, we would adhere to the Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan.

Question 7 – We have not contended that the Interlocutory Judgment divided the interest as a “partition by sale.” We are only saying that the Judgment, written by Nic Forestiere with the “blessing” and/or help of Ric Forestiere, divided the interest in the property and gave the entire “Forestiere Underground Gardens” to Ric and that Mary and Joseph's property contained NO “Underground Gardens”. Based upon that fact, and the fact that during the entire court proceeding to partition the property NO mention was made by Ric Forestiere, his family, nor his attorney and representatives that any tunnels or passageways were on the eastern half of the property. When the judge ruled in Ric's favor, to award him the entirety of the “Forestiere Underground Gardens”, Ric, nor his attorney objected or complained that tunnels and passageways existed on the eastern half of the property and therefore the property couldn't be divided.

Question 8 – The letter signed by Joseph and Ric Forestiere was intended to authorize the California Department of Parks and

Recreation for the number, registration and erection of a historical landmark **PERIOD**. At the time when the letter was signed, the property HAD to include the entire 8.8 acres as it was all one parcel. At **NO** time does the letter state that the property was to be protected from future development forever. Also, at **NO** time, did Joseph ever give up any and all rights to future development by signing the letter.

Question 9 – The Highway City Specific Plan mentions protections for the “Forestiere Underground Gardens” specifically. What is the definition of the “Forestiere Underground Gardens”? What land parcel(s) is the Specific Plan referring? Did the Highway City Specific Plan citizens committee mean to include Joseph and Mary’s eastern half of the original 8.8 acres as the Forestiere Underground Gardens? **We think NOT.**

Question 10 – Assuming there exists some remnants of what Baldassare intended to build on Mary’s 4.41 acres, and financial resources are available to “restore” his dream, how would recreating today what Baldassare envisioned would qualify as historical? If something that qualifies as historical today was built by Baldassare in 1946 or earlier, how does his vision built by someone else today qualify as historical?

Question 11 – A building built in the late 1950s that was added to the List of Historical Resources in the early 1980s doesn’t

qualify for Historical status some 25-30 years later. Being that it was built in the late 1950s means that Baldassare didn't build it, someone else did and therefore was not a significant historical resource of the underground gardens. In addition, it was not partially demolished by representatives of Mary Forestiere. We are unsure how the building collapsed. As for the mature trees, those we cut down by a potential lessee to clear the property to make room for his/her use. We find NO significant historical resource of those trees or the old fruit stand.

Question 12 – Any discussions heard by Ric Forestiere were not made by representatives of Mary Forestiere. At no time did Mary give anyone permission to “bulldoze and fill in” anything on the property. When Mary received the letter from Ric Forestiere's attorney, it was her first and only notification that her property was included on the City's List of Historical Resources. Once she received the letter, communication was made to begin the process to remove her acreage from the Historical resources list.

Question 13 – Not true. The building was not historic as confirmed by Marc's statement that it was built in the late 1950's by someone other than Baldassare. In addition, you saw in your tour of the property this past Saturday that there has

been no attempt to destroy the lakeside stairwell. As a matter of fact, the stairwell exists in pretty good condition.

Since Ric, through his spokesperson son Marc has proceeded to cast dispersions and throw stones upon Mary Forestiere, I'd like for him to answer a few questions. Like, where is the historic building that was located on top of the south end of the ballroom? (Original pictures available but not distributed since only one set is available as of today).

When the property was included on the City's list of Historic Resources, a building was on top of the south end of the ballroom. As of today, that building is no longer in existence. Where did it go? Why did he tear it down? Was permission obtained from the HPC? How did this happen?

Also, you saw where Ric and his representatives created vehicle paths on the back end of the underground gardens and there was even a vehicle parked next to the south end of the ballroom. If Ric is so concerned with vibrations created by vehicle traffic on Shaw Avenue and or effects of heavy equipment moving dirt on Mary's property and its effects on the underground gardens, why does he continue today and for the past 25+ years, drive vehicles, tractors and haul trailers full of thousands of pounds of cement cinder blocks, concrete, hardpan and old telephone poles and railroad ties over the top of tunnels and passageways he believes connect to Mary's

property? Why is he allowed to do that? He is destroying the underground gardens on his property and if tunnels exist on our property, he is destroying ours too.

And what about the other buildings added to the top of the underground gardens? Were permits pulled, was permission obtained from the HPC to erect and/or move buildings?

Lastly, what work has Ric done to preserve the souvenir tunnel? That tunnel has been allowed to erode and its erosion is encroaching upon Mary's property? Why hasn't he fixed this? Why does he continue to be allowed to ignore this issue? The fence has fallen into disrepair due to the erosion of Ric's souvenir tunnel. The fence is falling down, thereby causing a possible safety and security issue. We request that he fix this.

I know that I asked this of some, if not all of the commissioners, that I know you don't have an answer to but what scrutiny was performed at the time the original application was submitted for listing on the City's List of Historic Resources? Did anyone on that commission scrutinize Jan Wampler's map? Did anyone on that commission see the actual underground tunnels and passageways on the property that now belongs to Mary? It seems little, if any, research was performed before the property was listed and now you are requiring Mary to do the exact thing that was not asked of Ric when he submitted the application to have the property added to the City's list of

Historical Resources. How can Mary disprove a ghost? Tell her how that works?

And finally, If this commission decides to recommend to the City Council that Mary's request to have the boundary moved be denied due to the significant historic resources on Mary's property, then Mary asks that someone from this commission or the City of Fresno show her where on her property these significant resources exist and at what depth and condition they exist. Where are the access points to these resources? Are they on Mary's property or the Forestiere Underground Gardens? Show us how we would access these supposed tunnels and passageways? In addition, Mary asks that this commission or the City of Fresno provide indisputable documented proof beyond the disputed and questionable map drawn by Jan Wampler from Ric's memory that any significant resources, which lie under Mary's property, are in a condition that qualifies as a significant historic resource that needs preservation and not already completely destroyed due to disrepair and negligence as no one in Mary's family believe they exist.

I, on behalf of Mary Forestiere and her family, have a solution. The solution is this; This commission recommend to uphold Mary's request to move the boundary to exclude all of her property from the City of Fresno's List of Historic Resources, excluding the Lake-side stairwell that you saw, and if Ric and/or any of his family or representatives end up in an ownership position of Mary's property someday, he and/or his representatives can dig up the entire 4.41 acre parcel looking for the "Lost Forestiere Underground Gardens" and if they find them, they can re-apply to have the entire parcel added to the City of Fresno's List of Historic Resources.

January 10, 2012

Historic Preservation Commission
City of Fresno

RE: Response to Marc Forestiere's January 9, 2012 letter to the HPC

As you read through Marc's letter he continues to say the eastern property MAY contain remnants of the island wine cellar under the old lake. No proof has ever been given that these remnants exist today or existed when the property was added as a California Historical Landmark or added to the City's List of Historical Resources. The may have existed in 1924, and according to Ric's letter they may have existed as late as 1938, but we have no confirmation they exist today. Why doesn't Ric recall the lake being there in the early 1970s when he took over the lease and operated the Gardens until the mid-1980s? Why didn't Ric search for and locate the tunnels and passageways or even the island wine cellar during the time he operated the lease from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s? We contend that they never existed and that Ric's recollection when he was 8-10 years old is suspect at best. Even if they do exist today, where exactly on Mary's parcel are they located? How deep underground are they? Who can pinpoint their exact location? Nothing that Marc and Ric have provided, including Ric's hand-drawn map and Wampler's map gives us any indication to the exact location of the tunnels, passageways and or island wine cellar. At best, we can "guestimate" where these historic resources MAY be but not to a degree of certainty to warrant including as a historical resource. How can we confirm they even exist today? Nobody, including Ric, can say where or even if they exist today.

As for Joseph deeding the entire 10-acres, deeding is not an accurate description. As a matter of fact, it's the wrong verb. The only thing Joseph signed was a letter authorizing the Department of Parks and Recreation of the State of California to number, register and erect a landmark on the property. At no time did Joseph "deed" anything to anyone.

As for the "City of Fresno independently or together with a Non-profit organization purchasing the 4.41 acres in order to preserve and protect the public interest in this irreplaceable historic treasure", this is what Ric and his family have been seeking for the past 25+ years. The truth finally comes out. They have never and will never have the means to purchase the property and are looking for handouts from the City or someone else to buy the property and donate it to "their" six person "family controlled" conservancy. It's been their only goal for the past 25+ years, ever since the court divided the property. If Ric and his family are so concerned to keep the property intact, why don't they sell the Forestiere Underground Gardens to Mary Forestiere and her family?

As for the HPC to remove the status for an "open-air market" this was never disclosed to anyone other than City employees and I am appalled that this was disclosed to a disinterested third party. What we negotiate and discuss with the City of Fresno shouldn't be disclosed to anyone. I would think some type of privacy/confidentiality would be adhered to by City staff.

Regardless of whether we place an open-air market or other business on the property is irrelevant to our request to have the historical status removed.

As for Marc's additional questions, I'll respond as follows:

Question 1 – The "fruit stand," as Marc admitted in previous correspondence, was built in the late 1950s by someone other than Baldassare and when the application was filed in early 1980s that building was around 25-30 years old and shouldn't qualify for historic status since it was less than 50 years old. The fact that it has

cement floors, electricity and running water doesn't negate the fact that it was a fruit stand. As for Mary's intention to sell or develop her property is irrelevant to this issue. It's none of Ric or his family's business how, when and what type of business/development Mary wishes to sell or lease to. This has been an issue ever since the property was divided 25+ years ago. Ric and his family have always interfered with any and all plans by Joseph and Mary Forestiere to do anything on their property. It's as if Ric and his family feel "entitled" to control what happens on Mary's property and it continues today. We have allowed Ric and his family to operate the underground gardens peacefully during the past 25+ years and we've had enough.

Question 2- Nowhere in the Judgment, written by Nicholas Forestiere, Ric's son, does the judgment only refer to the "Open" portions of the underground gardens. The judgment was referring to the entire 8.8 acres when it was written by Nicholas and signed by all parties. If it was the intent by Judge Henry to separate the property into two pieces based upon some other formula, that was never discussed and Ric and his son/attorney Nicholas had every opportunity to fight for a sale versus a partition if they felt there was any underground tunnels and passageways under Mary's eastern portion. Ric and his family were more than satisfied to get "ALL of the Forestiere Underground Gardens" in the court decision.

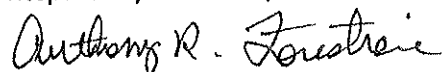
Question 3 - I have provided our responses to Marc's questions in his January 4, 2012 letter, in my statement to the Commission at their January 9, 2012 meeting.

Question 4 - We disagree that the 1969 RW Greenwood map was made for a legal dispute and was incomplete. We believe the map was created to document what was in existence in 1969. As for the Wampler map, Marc admits, and Wampler confirms that he never toured the entire property and drew the map from conversations he had with Ric Forestiere. Those conversations included "dreams" of what Baldassare had in mind and many of his "dreams" never materialized. As for the statement that the owners signed to preserve and maintain the premises as a Memorial Estate, it is our contention that this should remain the case on the western portion of the property currently owned by Ric Forestiere. We see no reason to keep this designation on Mary's parcel as we have stated numerous times there are no significant historical resources above or below ground on Mary's parcel, except for the lake-side stairwell.

As a final statement, we ask that this Commission grant Mary her request to move the boundary to the fence line that currently separates the two parcels, add in the lake-side stairwell as an easement, and separate the remaining 99.8% of Mary's property from the City's List of Historic Resources.

If this Commission is so inclined to deny Mary's request, please let her know where and at what depth the "supposed" historic resources are located on her property and provide her with the location of access points to the "supposed" historic resources. As I mentioned in my statement from the meeting on January 9, 2012, if we somehow can prove that something exists underground on Mary's property, what is the current condition of the resource? Is it in such disrepair that any attempt to determine its significance would cause more damage or are these "supposed" tunnels and passageways so constructed that we could tour them today if we knew how to access them? Is it our contention that there are no tunnels and passageways that may exist under Mary's property and if evidence is provided to the contrary, what condition are they in? Could the tunnels and passageways be so degraded and or destroyed to the point that they would provide any additional significant historical resource to warrant inclusion on the City's List of Historic Resources? We contend not.

Respectfully submitted,



Anthony R. Forestiere



REPORT TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

AGENDA ITEM NO. VIA
HPC MEETING: 12/12/2011

December 12, 2011

FROM: CRAIG SCHARTON, Assistant Director
Development and Resource Management Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON *KHD*
Historic Preservation Project Manager
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

SUBJECT: CONSIDER RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL OF A REQUEST BY THE OWNER OF THE 4.41 ACRE PARCEL LOCATED WITHIN THE BOUNDARY OF THE PROPERTY PREVIOUSLY DESIGNATED AS HP#177, TO AMEND THE LOCAL REGISTER NOMINATION TO REMOVE HIS PARCEL FROM THE AREA DESIGNATED AS A HISTORIC RESOURCE PURSUANT TO FMC 12-1614 AND 12-1609.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission recommend to the City Council denial of the request of the property owner to amend Local Register HP#177 in order to remove the 4.41 acre (eastern) parcel included within the site of the Forestiere Underground Gardens until such time that sufficient new information is presented which satisfies the requirements of FMC 12-1614.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forestiere Underground Gardens is a designated historic property on the City's Local Register of Historic Resources (HP# 177) (Appendix B). It is also a registered California Historical Landmark (No. 916) and is listed as well on the National Register of Historic Places. When designated, the site was a ten acre parcel "less streets and roads" (NR nomination 28 March 1977). In 1991 the parcel was divided between two branches of the Forestiere family, with the western 4.29 acres containing "all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens'" partitioned from the "real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens'" (25 April 1991 Appendix C). Based on this 1991 court judgment, and the desire to sell and/or develop the eastern 4.41 acre parcel, the property owner, Mary Forestiere, is requesting that the Commission recommend to the City Council that her property be removed from the Local Register of Historic Resources. Pursuant to FMC 12-1609(b)(2), a public notice regarding this agenda item was published in the Fresno Bee on December 3, 2011.

Staff is sympathetic to the right of the property owner to adequately benefit from her property. However, the issue is complicated by several factors. Both the National Register nomination and Historic Resource Inventory forms submitted for the Local Register included a site map which depicted numerous tunnels and features on what is now the east 4.41 parcel (Appendix B). To amend the designation of a property listed on the Local Register of Historic Resources the action "shall result from new information, the discovery of earlier misinformation or change of original circumstances, conditions or factors which justified the designation of the Resource or District" (FMC 12-1614). To date, the City has insufficient evidence to indicate that the resources on the eastern portion have lost integrity or are non-existent. Furthermore, the court order dividing the property in 1991 does not provide this information. In addition, the Gardens are called out as an invaluable asset with numerous policies and implementation actions adopted through the Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan (January 6, 1998, Appendix D). These

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Staff report on request to delist 4.41 acre parcel from Forestiere Underground Gardens

December 12, 2011

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policies were intended not only to promote the Gardens for commercial and recreational purposes but also to protect the site from uses on adjacent or adjoining properties "that adversely affect or impact the aesthetic, structural integrity or public enjoyment of the Forestiere Underground Gardens."

BACKGROUND

From 1906 to 1946 Sicilian immigrant Baldasare Forestiere created an underground complex of 65 caverns, grottos, patios, and garden courts that encircled his subterranean home, north of the city of Fresno. The sections were inter-connected with underground passageways and promenades; later he added an 800-foot-long auto tunnel. To support the great mass of earth and to give permanence to his earthen sculptings, Forestiere used Roman arches, columns, and domes, hardly the work of an amateur builder. As architect Malcolm Wells has noted: "Thirteen years of training and the best we [architects] can produce are metal and glass boxes standing in parking lots! Forestiere demolishes us with a wheelbarrow and a dream." Hardpan, mortar, and cement were used not only for structural purposes, but also for textural variety and beautification.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 28, 1977. The boundaries for the site included the "ten acre parcel less streets and roads." The nomination for the California Historical Landmark, also prepared in 1977, noted 7 acres of "grottos, patios and garden courts," although the inscription on the State Landmark plaque referred to the site as 10 acres:

NO. 916 FORESTIERE UNDERGROUND GARDENS - Here, beneath the hot, arid surface of the San Joaquin Valley, Baldasare Forestiere (1879-1946) began in the early 1900s to sculpt a fantastic retreat. Excavating the hardpan by hand, he created a unique complex of underground rooms, passages, and gardens which rambled throughout a ten-acre parcel. His work is being preserved as a living monument to a creative and individualistic spirit unbounded by conventionality.

The Underground Gardens was designated to Fresno's Local Register of Historic Resources by the Fresno City Council on 20 March 1984. The lot size noted on the inventory forms was 595 x 633 feet and the site map (also included in the nomination for the California Historical Landmark) depicted extensive resources throughout the entire parcel (Appendix B).

When Baldasare Forestiere died in 1946 the property was bequeathed to Guiseppi Forestiere, who in turn left the estate to his two sons, Joseph and Ricardo in 1973. In 1991 the property was partitioned between Joseph and Ricardo with Ricardo receiving the westerly portion and Joseph receiving the somewhat larger undeveloped eastern portion. In 1993 the Fifth District Court of Appeal affirmed the partition and the California Supreme Court denied Joseph Forestiere's petition for review (Bar Bulletin April 1994).

The question of whether underground resources associated with Forestiere are extant on the eastern (4.41 acre) parcel is critical to the request by the property owner to essentially delist her property from the Local Register of Historic Resources. In her letter of 2 November 2011, Mrs. Mary L. Forestiere cites the decision by Judge Stephen Henry in 1991 to award the "Underground Gardens" to Rick Forestiere whereas the remaining eastern parcel was undeveloped and therefore without historic status. She also notes that she has no plans to develop the property but is attempting to sell it and wishes to have the historic status removed prior to negotiating a contract (Appendix E). (City planning staff has recently met with representatives of the Mary Forestiere family regarding the potential to lease the parcel for use as an "international open air market.")

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The 1991 "Interlocutory Judgment Directing Partition of Real Property and Personal Property" in fact described a clear separation of the property based on the location of the "Forestiere Underground Gardens," granting to one party the "real property located west of the interior fence line which contain all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as "Forestiere Underground Gardens", from all of the real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the "Forestiere Underground Gardens." The Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan of 1998 also noted that the Gardens at one time "covered in excess of ten acres," however "as a result of indifferent and hostile land use policies and development, only approximately four acres remain of the original excavations" (1998:41).

It would appear, however, that the reference to the "Gardens" in both the settlement agreement and the Specific Plan was the portion of the resource which was open to the public for tours, rather than other assets of the overall site which were not open or safe for tourism. Historic designation has a different purpose: to protect the entire resource. To remove a property from the Local Register (as well as from the National Register) it is incumbent to provide "new information" or demonstrate the "discovery of earlier misinformation or change of original circumstances, conditions or factors which justified the designation of the Resource or District" (FMC 12-1614). Thus, what is the status and integrity of the resources indicated on site maps submitted with both the National Register and Local Register nominations? To date, the City has not received any information which would indicate the change to resources located on the eastern 4.41 acres of the site. It is also important to remember that whether there are completed tunnels or rooms that are extant and structurally sound may be moot as both Registers include a provision for sub-surface historic resources (Criterion D and iv).

Both the California Environmental Quality Act and the 1998 Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan address adjacency and context issues, as regards to a historic property. The framers of the Specific Plan were particularly cognizant of the importance which the Underground Gardens represented for tourism and the overall economic vitality of this Fresno neighborhood. Implementation Action 7-4-8 prohibits "the construction of structures and uses of real property on property adjacent or adjoining the Forestiere Underground Gardens that may adversely affect or impact the aesthetic, structural integrity or public enjoyment of the ... Gardens." Implementation Action 7-4-9 continued, "Mitigate the effects of uses on properties adjacent, adjoining or near the Forestiere Underground Gardens that create noise, vibration, odors or other adverse impacts..." Action 7-4-10 requires a "landscape buffer on properties contiguous to the Forestiere Underground Gardens."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, to date there is inadequate information to support the conclusion required under FMC 12-1614 that there are no significant extant resources on the eastern 4.41 acres of the site designated as the Forestiere Underground Gardens. A report by a professional cultural specialist, using perhaps the tool of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) would be a useful document to help clarify the question. However, even if this 4.41-acre parcel is removed from the historic boundaries, property owners will be constrained to some extent by the explicit provisions of the Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan as well as environmental reviews under the California Environmental Quality Act.

- Attachments:
- Exhibit A - 2008 Aerial of the Forestiere Underground Gardens.
 - Exhibit B - Historic Resource Inventory Prepared for the Forestiere Underground Gardens 11 December 1982.
 - Exhibit C - "Interlocutory Judgment Directing Partition of Real Property and Personal Property," 25 April 1991.
 - Exhibit D - "Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan (portion), City of Fresno Development Department, May 1995, Adopted by the Fresno City 6 January 1998.
 - Exhibit E - Letter to Karana Hattersley-Drayton from Mary L. Forestiere 2 November 2011.



**REPORT TO THE HISTORIC
PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

AGENDA ITEM NO. VB
HPC MEETING: 01/09/2012

January 9, 2012

FROM: CRAIG SCHARTON, Assistant Director
Development and Resource Management Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON
Historic Preservation Project Manager
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

SUBJECT: CONSIDER RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL OF A REQUEST BY THE OWNER OF THE 4.41 ACRE PARCEL LOCATED WITHIN THE BOUNDARY OF THE PROPERTY PREVIOUSLY DESIGNATED AS HP#177, TO AMEND THE LOCAL REGISTER NOMINATION TO REMOVE HIS PARCEL FROM THE AREA DESIGNATED AS A HISTORIC RESOURCE PURSUANT TO FMC 12-1614 AND 12-1609.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission review and consider documentary information submitted during and since the Commission meeting of December 12, 2010 as well as any observations from the site visit on January 7, 2012. Staff further recommends that the Commission continue this item to the January 23rd, 2012 meeting in order to properly evaluate the applicant's request pursuant to the requirements under FMC 12-1614.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forestiere Underground Gardens is a designated historic property on the City's Local Register of Historic Resources (HP# 177) (Appendix B). It is also a registered California Historical Landmark (No. 916) and is listed as well on the National Register of Historic Places. When designated, the site was a ten acre parcel "less streets and roads" (NR nomination 28 March 1977). In 1991 the parcel was divided between two branches of the Forestiere family, with the western 4.29 acres containing "all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens'" partitioned from the "real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the 'Forestiere Underground Gardens'" (25 April 1991 Appendix C). Based on this 1991 court judgment, and the desire to sell and/or develop the eastern 4.41 acre parcel, the property owner, Mary Forestiere, is requesting that the Commission recommend to the City Council that her property be removed from the Local Register of Historic Resources. Pursuant to FMC 12-1609(b)(2), a public notice regarding this agenda item was published in the Fresno Bee on December 3, 2011 and the item was considered at some length at the Historic Preservation Commission meeting on December 12, 2010.

To amend the designation of a property listed on the Local Register of Historic Resources the action "shall result from new information, the discovery of earlier misinformation or change of original circumstances, conditions or factors which justified the designation of the Resource or District" (FMC 12-1614). To date, the City has insufficient evidence to indicate that the resources on the eastern portion have lost integrity or are non-existent. (Information submitted to the City since the meeting of December 12, 2010 is currently being evaluated). In addition, the Gardens are called out as an invaluable asset with numerous policies and implementation actions adopted through the Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan (January 6, 1998, Appendix D). These policies were intended not only to promote the Gardens for commercial and recreational purposes but also to protect the site from uses on adjacent or adjoining properties "that adversely affect or impact the aesthetic, structural integrity or public enjoyment of the Forestiere Underground Gardens."

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BACKGROUND

From 1906 to 1946 Sicilian immigrant Baldassarre Forestiere created an underground complex of 65 caverns, grottos, patios, and garden courts that encircled his subterranean home, north of the city of Fresno. The sections were inter-connected with underground passageways and promenades; later he added an 800-foot-long auto tunnel. To support the great mass of earth and to give permanence to his earthen sculptures, Forestiere used Roman arches, columns, and domes, hardly the work of an amateur builder. As architect Malcolm Wells has noted: "Thirteen years of training and the best we [architects] can produce are metal and glass boxes standing in parking lots! Forestiere demolishes us with a wheelbarrow and a dream." Hardpan, mortar, and cement were used not only for structural purposes, but also for textural variety and beautification.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 28, 1977. The boundaries for the site included the "ten acre parcel less streets and roads." The nomination for the California Historical Landmark, also prepared in 1977, noted 7 acres of "grottos, patios and garden courts," although the inscription on the State Landmark plaque referred to the site as 10 acres:

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The Underground Gardens was designated to Fresno's Local Register of Historic Resources by the Fresno City Council on 20 March 1984. The lot size noted on the inventory forms was 595 x 633 feet and the site map (also included in the nomination for the California Historical Landmark) depicted extensive resources throughout the entire parcel (Appendix B).

When Baldasare Forestiere died in 1946 the property was bequeathed to Guiseppi Forestiere, who in turn left the estate to his two sons, Joseph and Ricardo in 1973. In 1991 the property was partitioned between Joseph and Ricardo with Ricardo receiving the westerly portion and Joseph receiving the somewhat larger undeveloped eastern portion. In 1993 the Fifth District Court of Appeal affirmed the partition and the California Supreme Court denied Joseph Forestiere's petition for review (Bar Bulletin April 1994).

The question of whether underground resources associated with Forestiere are extant on the eastern (4.41 acre) parcel is critical to the request by the property owner to essentially delist her property from the Local Register of Historic Resources. In her letter of 2 November 2011, Mrs. Mary L. Forestiere cites the decision by Judge Stephen Henry in 1991 to award the "Underground Gardens" to Rick Forestiere whereas the remaining eastern parcel was undeveloped and therefore without historic status. She also notes that she has no plans to develop the property but is attempting to sell it and wishes to have the historic status removed prior to negotiating a contract (Appendix E). (City planning staff has recently met with representatives of the Mary Forestiere family regarding the potential to lease the parcel for use as an "international open air market.")

The 1991 "Interlocutory Judgment Directing Partition of Real Property and Personal Property" in fact described a clear separation of the property based on the location of the "Forestiere Underground Gardens," granting to one party the "real property located west of the interior fence line which contain all of the underground rooms, passages and courtyards commonly known as "Forestiere Underground

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Gardens", from all of the real property east of the interior fence line which does not contain the "Forestiere Underground Gardens." The Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan of 1998 also noted that the Gardens at one time "covered in excess of ten acres," however "as a result of indifferent and hostile land use policies and development, only approximately four acres remain of the original excavations" (1998:41).

It would appear, however, that the reference to the "Gardens" in both the settlement agreement and the Specific Plan was the portion of the resource which was open to the public for tours, rather than other assets of the overall site which were not open or safe for tourism. Historic designation has a different purpose: to protect the entire resource. To remove a property from the Local Register (as well as from the National Register) it is incumbent to provide "new information" or demonstrate the "discovery of earlier misinformation or change of original circumstances, conditions or factors which justified the designation of the Resource or District" (FMC 12-1614). Thus, what is the status and integrity of the resources indicated on site maps submitted with both the National Register and Local Register nominations? To date, the City has not received any information which would indicate the change to resources located on the eastern 4.41 acres of the site. It is also important to remember that whether there are completed tunnels or rooms that are extant and structurally sound may be moot as both Registers include a provision for sub-surface historic resources (Criterion D and iv).

Both the California Environmental Quality Act and the 1998 Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan address adjacency and context issues, as regards to a historic property. The framers of the Specific Plan were particularly cognizant of the importance which the Underground Gardens represented for tourism and the overall economic vitality of this Fresno neighborhood. Implementation Action 7-4-8 prohibits "the construction of structures and uses of real property on property adjacent or adjoining the Forestiere Underground Gardens that may adversely affect or impact the aesthetic, structural integrity or public enjoyment of the ... Gardens." Implementation Action 7-4-9 continued, "Mitigate the effects of uses on properties adjacent, adjoining or near the Forestiere Underground Gardens that create noise, vibration, odors or other adverse impacts..." Action 7-4-10 requires a "landscape buffer on properties contiguous to the Forestiere Underground Gardens."

New Information:

At the December 12, 2011 public meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission, Anthony Forestiere, representing the Mary Forestiere family, gave testimony and submitted several documents, including numerous photographs, a "Map of Survey" by R.W. Greenwood Associates, Inc. (April 29, 1969) and an Appraisal Report dated June 27, 1990 by Robert Wilson and Associates. Mr. Forestiere also questioned whether or not the Local Register designation of the Gardens in 1984 was legally appropriate, as the Mary Forestiere family has no memory of Joseph Forestiere as co-owner approving this designation.

Local Register designation of the Forestiere Underground Gardens: Pursuant to FMC 12-1609(a)(7), owner consent for the Local Register is not required. One would have to research earlier versions of the Ordinance to see whether this was also the case prior to the update to the ordinance in 1999. The file on the property, however, indicates that a "Notice of Hearing" was sent to both Ricardo and Joseph Forestiere at the 5021 W. Shaw Avenue address on February 3, 1984. The City Council held its hearing and voted to designate the Gardens to the Local Register on March 20, 1984; the statute of limitations to challenge this decision has long since past.

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Map of Survey, R.W. Greenwood Associates, Inc (April 29, 1969) depicts no tunnels or features on the east 4.41 acres other than an auto passage/driveway on the surface. The map, however, indicates extensive subsurface features on the west side of the site. **Parcel Map No. 94-02** prepared by the same firm in 1993 (?) depicts a small building [the souvenir shop?] a drain well, paved area with a driveway, and stairway close to another well on the east parcel. City staff has consulted with Greenwood Associates and is waiting for additional information on whether they have knowledge of any sub-surface features on the eastern 4.41 acres.

Appraisal Report, Robert B. Wilson and Associates, June 27, 1990. This report was prepared on behalf of Nicolas Forestiere Esq. (son of Ric Forestiere). The total property assessed, in preparation for the division of the site, was 8.63 acres. The appraisal noted that the Greenwood Associates survey was relied upon for the exterior boundaries and scope of the "diggings" open to the public. The consultant who prepared the report, Charles W. Puckett, was coincidentally trained in engineering and architecture. He observed "The Underground Gardens are located in the NW 2 ½ acres having 340 ft on Shaw and 325 feet on Forestiere Avenue." The actual portion open to the public (at that time) totaled "60,000 sf or 1.38 acres." He also noted that "the gardens were never really finished."

Letter and materials submitted by Marc Forestiere, 4 January 2012. Marc Forestiere, son of Ricardo (Ric) Forestiere, submitted a letter with photos and newspaper articles. Several features have been marked on the aerial map which was initially prepared for the City's staff report, December 12, 2011. Item "G" is noted as an "old souvenir shop," which apparently faced onto Shaw Avenue. Google photos for this structure appear to depict a fruit stand, similar to those seen throughout the Fresno area especially for strawberries. Item "A" depicts the remnants of a smoke house building. This "smokehouse" is not depicted on the site map attributed to Jan Wampler and which was used in all the nomination forms.

Fresno Bee articles, March 23, 1923 and May 3, 1924. Copies of these articles are of great interest as they record the first-hand impressions of writers less than 20 years after Baldassarre Forestiere began his excavations. Both articles note the preparation for and the creation of a small lake, which was intended to be developed into an elaborate recreational and tourist facility. It should be noted that Baldassarre Forestiere clearly intended to have his Gardens serve a public function, beyond his own personal residential needs. The 1923 article references the presence of a surface lake and Baldassarre's plan to build a tunnel that would connect the "workings to the center of the lake." The 1924 article noted that a "small lake is already in existence. It will be enlarged to a great extent." Neither article notes the location of this lake but a hand drawn map by Mr. Ric Forestiere indicates that it was on the east side of the property.

Lake on east parcel. The 1977 National Register nomination also noted that "On ground level there was a small lake of which only a few remnants remain. Vanishing traces can only faintly be detected, which instead of being enlarged as contemplated, was filled in by tenants for the present parking lot." However, in 1977 both brothers, Ricardo and Joseph are notarized as signing the nomination. As stewards of this property it was their purview to protect this former resource. One assumes that the lake was never finished, nor the tunnel to connect to it built, and that by the National Register nomination there was scant little to document on this side of the property.

Site map attributed to Dr. Jan Wampler, M.I.T. The site map used for all three Register program nominations----the National Register, the State Landmark and Fresno's Local Register----was attributed to Dr. Jan Wampler. This map depicts numerous resources on what are now both parcels, including several noted as "unopened" on the east 4.41 acre parcel, owned by Mary Forestiere. Staff contacted Dr.

REPORT TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Staff report on request to delist 4.41 acre parcel from Forestiere Underground Gardens
January 9, 2012

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Wampler on 13 December 2011 regarding his knowledge of the resources on the east side and his methodology in surveying them. Dr. Wampler's responded on December 14, 2011 and stated "I do not remember how I made the map, but I think I must have [received] the information from another source as I clearly did not survey the area." Staff and commissioners are thus left wondering about the original source of this map, and its accuracy.

The Historic Preservation Commission is slated to tour both the west and east parcels on January 7th during which additional questions may be asked, and answered. It is therefore the staff recommendation to continue this item to the regularly scheduled meeting on January 23rd in order to allow time to properly evaluate all information.

- Attachments:
- Exhibit A - 2008 Aerial of the Forestiere Underground Gardens.
 - Exhibit B - Historic Resource Inventory Prepared for the Forestiere Underground Gardens 11 December 1982.
 - Exhibit C - "Interlocutory Judgment Directing Partition of Real Property and Personal Property," 25 April 1991.
 - Exhibit D - "Highway City Neighborhood Specific Plan (portion), City of Fresno Development Department, May 1995, Adopted by the Fresno City 6 January 1998.
 - Exhibit E - Letter to Karana Hattersley-Drayton from Mary L. Forestiere 2 November 2011.
 - Exhibit F - Letter and Information from Marc Forestiere 4 January 2012.
 - Exhibit G - Letter to Mary Forestiere from Parker.Stanbury LLP 28 June 2011.

1937 Aerial

16320

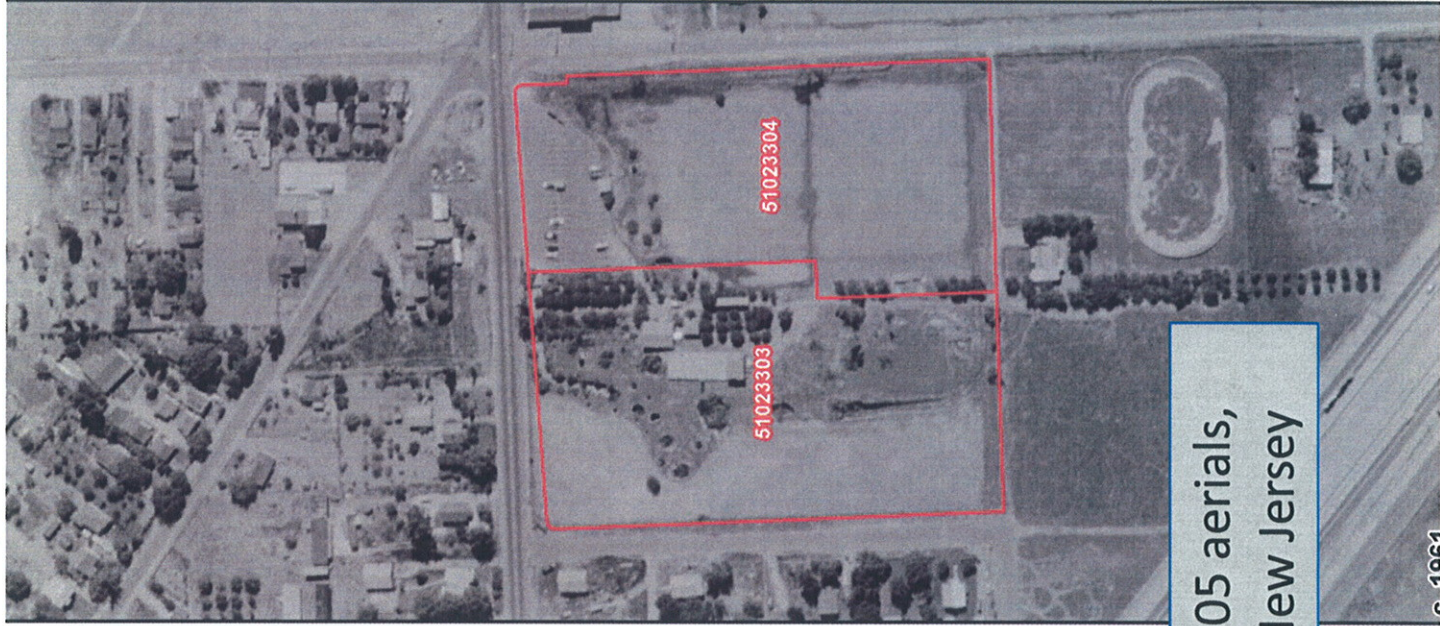
16349

18488



1950 Aerial





C1946, 1961 and 2005 aerials,
Courtesy, AECOM, New Jersey



REPORT TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

AGENDA ITEM NO. VIA
HPC MEETING: 01/23/2012

January 23,, 2012

FROM: CRAIG SCHARTON, Assistant Director
Development and Resource Management Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON
Historic Preservation Project Manager
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

SUBJECT: REVIEW AND SET PRIORITIES FOR HPC 2012 WORK PLAN

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission review the minutes generated from the December 3, 2011 off-site workshop. Staff further recommends that the Commission discuss the draft bench marks and develop a reasonable timeline for meeting these 2012 Work Plan goals.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The duties and powers of the Commission are delineated in the Fresno Municipal Code at Section 12-1606. As with the State Historical Resources Commission, these duties are extensive and diverse. Realistically, many of these tasks are performed by City staff---as for example maintenance of the current listing of all designated resources--- rather than by the seven volunteer Commissioners. However, the Commission has the authority to take the initiative and set priorities for their own work plan, based on the FMC, the Commission By-laws or General Plan objectives.

On December 3, 2011 the Commission met at the Dickey Youth Center in a workshop facilitated by Assistant Director Craig Scharton (see attached workshop "minutes.") At the conclusion of the session Commissioners and staff voted on the top goals for the calendar year 2012 which were "Building Partnerships" and "Re-branding Preservation," both of which appear to dovetail nicely into one another.

Assistant Director Scharton and Commission Secretary Karana Hattersley-Drayton recently met to outline a draft outline for meeting these goals. As Scharton noted at the December 3, 2011 workshop, there is a tension between wanting to do everything versus concentrating on a few issues. Therefore the following are some suggested steps for how to both build partnerships and develop a more successful brand for preservation in Fresno:

Goal	Task1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6
Building Partnerships	Create/refine list of partners	Communicate historic preservation concerns through newsletter	Develop plans for a roundtable or conference which will include local groups as identified in Task 1	Invite groups	Hold roundtable conference to discuss preservation in Fresno	Follow-up
(Re)branding preservation	Generate ideas for how best to rebrand and advertise preservation			Create publicity	Select branding and ad campaigns	Review success of 2012 Work Plan

Attachments: Exhibit A: Minutes from December 3, 2011 Off-site HPC Workshop.

Minutes for Historic Preservation Commission Off-Site Workshop

December 3, 2011

SATURDAY

9:30 AM-Noon

Dickey Youth Center (Conference Room) 1515 E. Divisadero Street, Fresno

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- I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL-** The meeting was called to order by Chair Molly LM Smith at 9:45 AM.

Commissioners present: Molly LM Smith, Chair
Don Simmons, Ph.D, Vice-Chair
Charlotte Konczal Esq.
Chris Johnson AIA
Joe Moore

Commissioners absent: Patrick Boyd

Staff present: Craig Scharton, Assistant Director
Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Historic Preservation Project Manager
Arianna Carrillo, Historic Preservation Intern

II. COMMISSION ITEMS:

- A . Workshop with Craig Scharton, Assistant Director, to discuss and prepare a Commission work plan for 2012.

Craig Scharton opened the workshop by stating the intention was to have a brainstorming session: what does the HPC want to accomplish in the future, (in light of limited staff resources)? Craig noted that he feels it is important to build constituencies.

Charlotte Konczal stressed the importance of working on historic districts; also focus on building partnerships in the community.

Don Simmons: it is important to "brand" historic preservation. Why is it good to have buildings designated? Make benefits for preservation clearer; that preservation is not just an elitist program. Make historic preservation "sexy"!

Charlotte Konczal added that training sessions for commissioners are important.

Don Simmons: It is important to be more inclusive of a variety of neighborhoods and communities; get representation from a variety of communities.

Chris Johnson: Agreed, that outreach to communities was critical and he particularly stressed revitalization efforts in Southwest Fresno and the importance of Kearney Boulevard.

Don Simmons: It is also important to remember non-building resources.

Joe Moore: We have a blind spot, the pockets of Post-War II housing tracts.

Molly Smith: We need to finish the Huntington Boulevard Historic District.

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Craig Scharton observed that there is a tension between wanting to do everything versus concentrating on a few issues. He then led the group through an exercise to break goals into smaller steps (using protocols from the Main Street Program). A good work plan allows you to begin to check off steps.

He then drew a template on the board and asked Commissioners to list the responsibilities of the following three groups: STAFF/COMMISSION/COMMUNITY:

Staff	Commission	Community
Administration support/prepares agenda packets for meetings Staff is the first contact for issues, front door for brand Legal standards and requirements; Chris Johnson feels this is a big problem as the legal department at City Hall works directly for the City Council and therefore cannot really represent preservation issues or even the administration (long discussion about this issue) Craig asks, what are your expectations of staff? What can he do better? Molly and Joe: Craig's role is primarily back-up and an advocate for historic preservation with Council and public. Chris: Communicate issues with the City Council, implement the General Plan	We are not an obstacle! We need to develop goals and guidelines and priorities for staff (Charlie). Chris: Start with General Plan goals. Charlie: our responsibility is to the community through HP decisions and goals. Molly: state position before voting on issues. Charlie: involve the public in workshops. Joe: be ambassadors for preservation... need to develop an "elevator pitch" a 90 second sound bite about importance of history and preservation. Charlie: we need to tell the right story: we are volunteers, Commission is just a part of our life.	Charlie: the community provides "eyes" for the HPC; they should become advocates and not just for specific issues- become advocates with elected leaders; how to tap into positive interest in history County Courthouse demolition was a riveting event; discussion about history versus built environment (folks may be very interested in local history but not "get" or support historic preservation). Don: We don't have systems in place for public to rally behind a preservation issue... non-profits are much more active, for example, in Savannah. What would be our "dream community"? Chris: RDA would choose preservation and not just new construction.

<p>Charlie: Craig is the face of the brand; on top of the pyramid;</p> <p>Charlie: important to continue to build on relationship with Code Enforcement staff.</p> <p>Policy development: adaptive reuse/mothballing?</p> <p>Charlie: staff creates tools for the HPC; staff relies on staff for training.</p> <p>Commissioners note that Karana as staff is very accessible to them.</p> <p>Don asked: how high of a priority is historic preservation? Craig has a vision (e.g. for downtown); does that color planning decisions? Are you supposed to be neutral?</p> <p>Chris and Craig have convinced Mayor Swearingin of the importance of historic preservation. However, it seems like we have lost some ground with Council, need to be proactive, not just reactive.</p>	<p>Molly: Karana is overwhelmed with work and time constraints... does HPC set priorities or not?</p> <p>Chris: when he was first on the HPC there was no staff support.</p> <p>Don: there is training available on how to develop "pitches"</p> <p>Craig mentions, putting time into a "thesis statement" is useful.</p> <p>Joe: would like to see the group analyze the brand and how best to change it.</p> <p>Craig: HPC is a great group, don't think work is recognized.</p> <p>Joe notes the conundrum of the public: too much, or too little historic preservation.</p> <p>Don: how to prioritize what is crucial to know about CEQA?</p> <p>Charlie: orientation packet for the Commission should include focus.</p> <p>Craig notes, that nobody has mentioned a major responsibility of the HPC: as arbitrator over preservation issues, your decision-making authority.</p> <p>Don disagrees: feels that we spend more time reviewing plans for which we can only offer comments</p>	<p>Craig asks: where are the local neighborhood communities? Chris notes that it is an issue of time, leverage of resources. No public here today, why? Should we blame them, or us?</p> <p>Molly asks, who are the various potential stakeholders/community groups (following list is created): Fresno Historical Society Heritage Fresno County Landmarks Comm. AIA Cultural Arts PBID FCASH Lowell Neighborhood Fresno Arts Council Chinatown Revitalization Alumni groups (CAL Bears) Fresno State University Fresno City College Church groups Central Sierra Hist. Society Germans from Russia 10x10 list Creative Fresno Fresno Home Tour Individual professors, such as Kris Clark</p> <p>Joe notes: we need to build a coalition, provide a unified marketing message</p> <p>[Karana asks Arianna who attends FSU for her thoughts] Arianna, FSU, also Nancy Bryan and internship programs</p> <p>Don mentions lack of connection with FCC and FSU teachers who offer some kind of local history or preservation classes.</p>
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	[Karana agrees and clarifies that the historic preservation ordinance is very clear about permit review and authority (thus a finding) vis-à-vis comments only.	
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Craig Scharton then encouraged the Commission to set some basic goals and to vote on what they feel are priorities for 2012. Everyone was allowed three votes.

Build constituencies	(2)
Recognize districts	(2)
Prioritize districts	(0)
Build partnerships	(5)
Proactive preservation	(3)
Brand preservation in Fresno	(3)
Benefits of listing	(0)
Mid-century modernism	(0)
Non-building resources	(0)
Being inclusive	(2)
Communication	(1)
Training	(0)

Work Plan for 2012: Based on the voting and discussion, the most important goal for 2012 is to Build Partnerships. What are the basic steps? Put all the constituencies in one room? Awards? Sticks and Carrots?

The Commissioners are volunteers, staff resources are limited, how best to focus on this goal?

Charlotte Konczal: We need a more distinct brand, include various groups and their input.

Top three goals of the Commission are interrelated, why are partnerships hampered?

Don Simmons: what are barriers from the past that we need to overcome? Personalities? Can HPC members attend other groups' meetings more often? Don notes that some communities do not have "meetings" per se (such as the disabled), but their voices still matter.

Proactive preservation: **Molly Smith** notes helpfulness of Commissioners keeping an eye on historic buildings. **Karana Hattersley-Drayton** agrees; from a staff perspective

it would be very useful if the Commission wanted to divvy up the list of historic properties and perhaps once a month visit a few at a time. Their eyes, and input/information from the community, is critical as we cannot be everywhere (she notes recent information from both Chris Johnson on a fire and Joe Moore and others on the Kress Building).

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Karana further suggests three goals she would like to pursue: 1) continue to focus on the Lowell community; 2) Do a Rehab Right workshop in the Lowell; 3) work to bring in the Yosemite Avenue Historic District.

Don Simmons mentions that the Lowell CDC is setting priorities of one block at a time, may next focus on San Pablo Avenue.

Craig Scharton notes that the health of the downtown is directly related to how well the community works together. Important to establish a positive tone for meetings.

Workshop was adjourned around 11:45 AM.

Respectfully submitted:

Karana Hattersley-Drayton, M.A.
Historic Preservation Project Manager



REPORT TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

AGENDA ITEM NO. VIB
HPC MEETING: 01/23/2012

January 23, 2012

FROM: CRAIG SCHARTON, Assistant Director
Development and Resource Management Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON
Historic Preservation Project Manager
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

SUBJECT: REVIEW AND MAKE FINDINGS ON REQUEST BY THE PROPERTY OWNER
FOR THE FLORA MONTAGUE BUNGALOW COURT LOCATED AT 950-960 E.
DIVISADERO STREET (HERITAGE PROPERTY #009) PURSUANT TO FMC-12-1619.

- 1) Review Plans by Property Owner for Window Repair and Replacement.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission review proposals by the property owner for restoration and/or replacement of windows in the Flora Montague Bungalow Court. Staff further recommends that the Commission approve the compromise solution for window treatment as proposed by the Commission sub-committee which met with the developer and staff on January 13, 2012.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Flora Montague Bungalow Court was constructed in a U Plan as seven discrete "bungalows" in 1922 and is the second oldest extant court in Fresno. It was designated by the Historic Preservation Commission as a "Heritage Property" pursuant to Fresno Municipal Code Section 12-1612 on May 21, 2007. The court was previously included in the 2004 "Bungalow" Court Survey prepared by the City of Fresno staff and consultants, with funding in part from a Certified Local Government grant through the California State Office of Historic Preservation. In this 2004 study the court was found eligible to the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 3 and for the Local Register of Historic Resources under Criterion iii.

FFDA Properties LLC. purchased the property in late November 2011. On January 9, 2012 the Commission reviewed and approved the request by the property owner to remove and replace the unit located at 952 E. Divisadero which burned in a fire in July, 2011 and approved elevation drawings for a new 2-bedroom, 1 bath unit which will replicate in materials and style the architecture of the burned unit. Other Commission action included approval of the restoration of Craftsman style porch posts to the facades of all extant units, in order to stabilize the porch canopies, and a proposal to add a new Craftsman style two-story unit to the rear of the parcel. The Commission also approved a Categorical Exemption Class 1, 3, 31 and 32 for the proposed work.

As part of the presentation at the January 9th Commission hearing the property owner proposed replacing the existing wood double hung sash windows in all the extant bungalows with new 1/1 vinyl sash. The replacement of existing, character-defining features in the court was not included in the project description submitted and analyzed for the Commission hearing on January 9th 2012. Although the proposal was discussed, no decision could be made at the meeting. The Commission appointed a two-person sub-committee to meet with the developers and staff to discuss window options. The group met on Friday, January 13, 2012.

BACKGROUND

FFDA Properties LLC proposes to replace most windows in the remaining five bungalows with 1/1 single hung vinyl sash. The extant bungalows include a total of 90 windows, of which most are 1/1 double hung sash with wood surrounds and lug sills. Also extant are several hopper style windows of which at least 3 are highly detailed, multi-pane in a Chinoiserie style, as was popular in buildings in the 19th through the early 20th centuries. The developers previously agreed to either repair or replicate these in wood. Windows are traditionally a character defining feature of any building, and are particularly important in a heritage property such as the Flora Montague Bungalow Court. Vinyl sash windows do not have the same design qualities or aesthetic, they lack the traditional "tongues" that are a simple but historic feature of older wood windows and they cannot be painted, thus the bright "white" look that detracts from the character and screams "new."

Pursuant to FMC 12-1619(e) the property owner may use the California Historical Building Code for work on the court. Under CHBC the property is exempt from Title 24 energy requirements. Replacement of all (or even most) of the windows will not allow for this exemption. Although energy efficiency per se is not a requirement for decision-making by the Commission, it is nevertheless important as a general consideration, particularly in Fresno with its hot summers. Unfortunately misinformation abounds about the energy savings which are gained from the insertion of dual-pane vinyl windows. Bob Riding, Community Energy Manager for PGE, has noted that customers often ask about the benefits of replacing windows or adding solar: *"but based on their ability to pay back the cost of installation, they should be considered nearer the bottom of the list. We want our customers to get the biggest bang for their energy efficiency investment and that comes from low cost measures such as sealing air leaks in the home, testing the ductwork for leaks and increasing insulation levels."* Mr. Riding also referenced a study prepared by the Center for Resource Conservation in Boulder Colorado, "The Effects of Energy Efficiency Treatments on Historic Windows". The study reported that retrofitted windows were inserted in a test home in a historic district. Consultants then compared the energy efficiency and economy of eleven different preservation treatment options with that of new vinyl windows. Most of the proposed treatments were able to outperform a new vinyl window (E-mail communication, Bob Riding 18 January 2012).

Use of vinyl windows also poses concerns for environmental review and clearance. The project description for the Court which was presented to the Commission and approved at the Special Meeting on January 9, 2012 was evaluated as Categorically Exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act Class 1, 3, 31 and 32. *"Class 31 consists of projects limited to maintenance, repair, stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, preservation, conservation or reconstruction of historical resources in a manner consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties...."* As a heritage property the Flora Montague Bungalow Court is not a mandatory or presumptive Historical Resource, and therefore use of this particular exemption was not required for this project. However, the applicant previously agreed to reconstruct the burned unit in a manner consistent with these standards such that it would be consistent with the remaining units. The assumption has been that the restoration of the Court would follow the Standards which provide a set of "best practices" for any older building. The Rehabilitation protocol best fits the overall work at the Court. As provided in the Standards, *"Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials."* (Emphasis added). Thus there is some flexibility to allow similar style windows with new materials, however, this is not the preferred or best practice

Cost and price are also not applicable to a heritage property, which unlike resources on the Local Register of Historic Resources, have no provisions for "economic hardship" under the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance. However, the sub-committee which met with the developer requested a cost comparison of vinyl versus wood, based on materials and labor (Exhibit C).

Proposed Solutions:

At a meeting held Friday, January 13, 2012 at City Hall, the property owners discussed several potential scenarios with Chair Molly LM Smith and Karana Hattersley-Drayton (Historic Preservation Project Manager). Commissioner Patrick Boyd concurrently met in the field with the contractor for FFDA Properties LLC.

The property owners are proposing the following:

Existing Structures

- Use the existing wood frames and install new single hung, double pane, low e vinyl windows.
- Attached for your reference is a photo of 954 Divisadero showing existing vinyl replacement windows. We are proposing to replace these windows with single hung, double pane, low e vinyl windows.
- We will rebuild the side lights on 960 Divisadero at this location with fixed single pane windows to match the existing pattern.
- We will rebuild new "Chinoiserie" windows to match the existing windows at the three existing locations with fixed single pane wood windows to match the existing patterns at the following locations
 - North and south side of 960 Divisadero
 - South side of 954 Divisadero.

New Bungalows – Use vinyl single hung windows with wood trim throughout.

The Commission sub-committee proposes the following:

Existing Bungalows:

- Restore or replace with wood in like style and materials all windows on the E. Divisadero frontage as well as the facades of all the existing units along the court.
- Restore or replace with exact replicas the three detailed (Chinoiserie style) hopper windows.
- Allow single-hung vinyl windows for the rear elevations of all existing units as well as any side elevations which are not readily seen from the court or E. Divisadero.

New Bungalows- Allow vinyl 1/1 single hung sash with wood surrounds and lug sills.

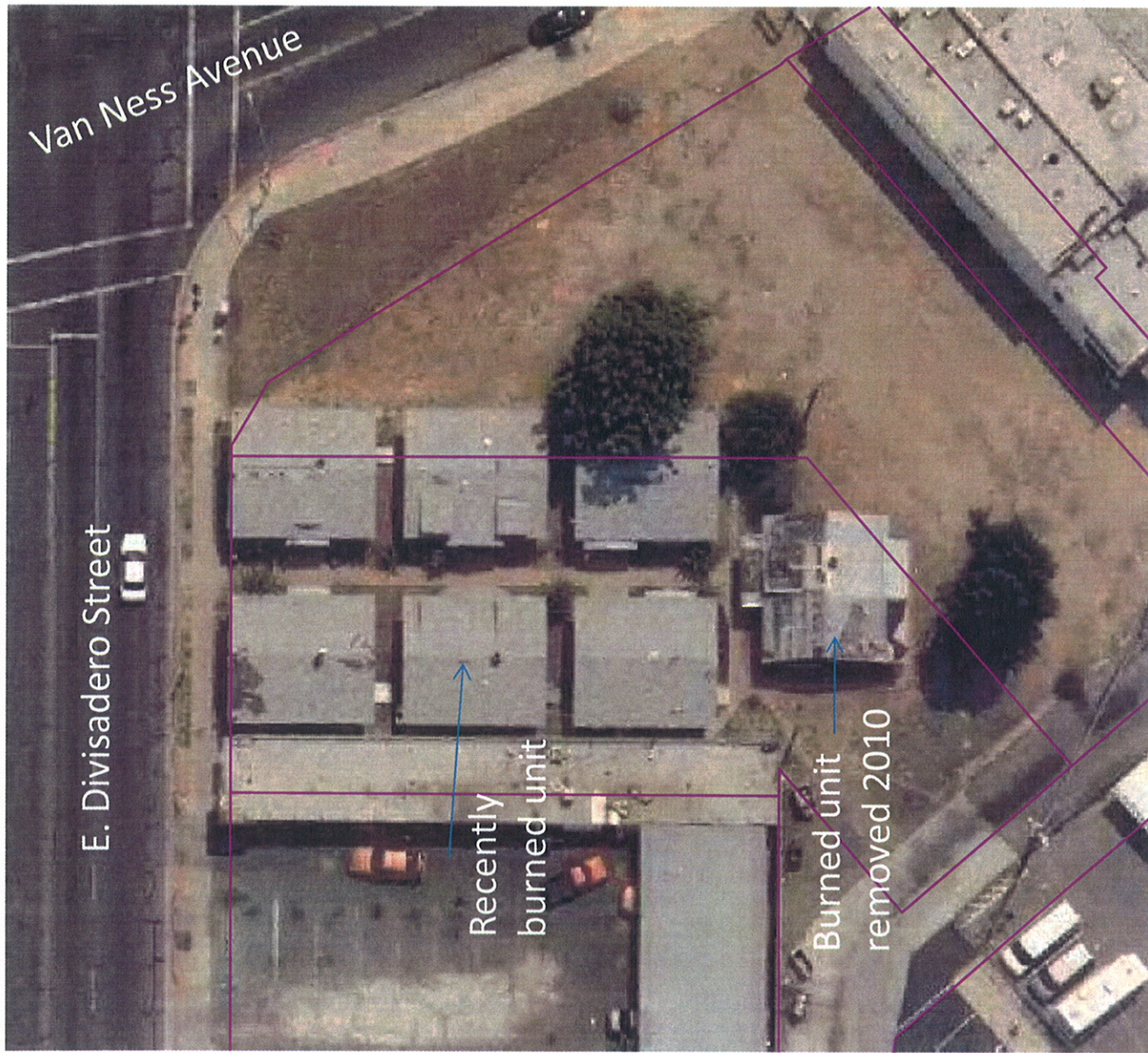
As a heritage property, the Flora Montague Bungalow Court does not fall under the purview or authority of the Fulton-Lowell Design Review Committee. However, as residents and property owners in the Lowell, members of the committee have expressed deep concern about the proposal to retrofit the bungalow court windows in vinyl. The Chair, Becky Foore-Hayden polled her committee members by telephone and although they preferred to see all wood windows, they unanimously approved the compromise solution proposed by the Historic Preservation Commission's sub-committee (as above).

CONCLUSION

The Flora Montague Bungalow Court is the second oldest bungalow court in Fresno and until recently provided working class housing as it did when constructed in 1922. The property serves as an important gateway to Fresno's Cultural Arts District. The reconstruction of the bungalow and the restoration of the entire court is an important step in the revitalization of Fresno's (historic) downtown. It is critical that this restoration represent best preservation practices. Although staff would strongly prefer to see the windows all restored, or when necessary, replaced in-kind (materials as well as style), staff also appreciates compromise as well as the developer's dedication to downtown revitalization. Staff recommends approval of the Commission's sub-committee compromise proposal, as outlined above.

Attachments:

- Exhibit A - 2008 Aerial of the Flora Montague Bungalow Court.
- Exhibit B- Site Map from Survey Forms Prepared 26 July 2004 by Jon L. Brady and Dana E. Supernowicz for the City of Fresno's "Bungalow Court Survey."
- Exhibit C - Cost Comparison for Windows, Vinyl versus Wood Submitted for FFDA Properties 17 January 2012.



2008 Aerial

950-960 E.
Divisadero
Street

Flora
Montague
Bungalow
Court
(HR#009)

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

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*Resource Name: 950-960 E. Divisadero Bungalow Court

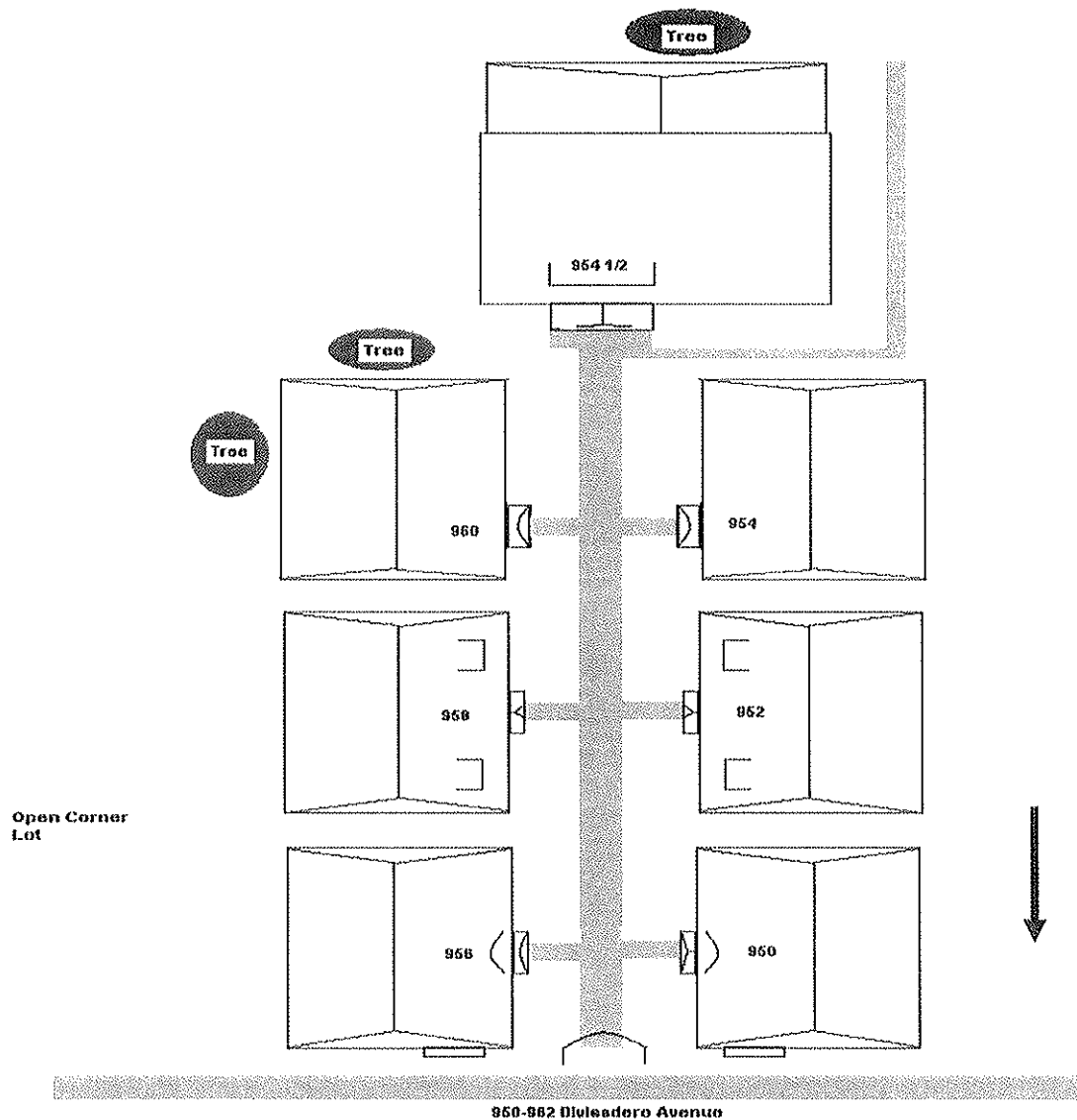
Recorded by: Jon Brady, Dana Supernowicz

Date 7/26/2004

☒ Continuation

☐ Update

Site Plan for 950-960 Divisadero



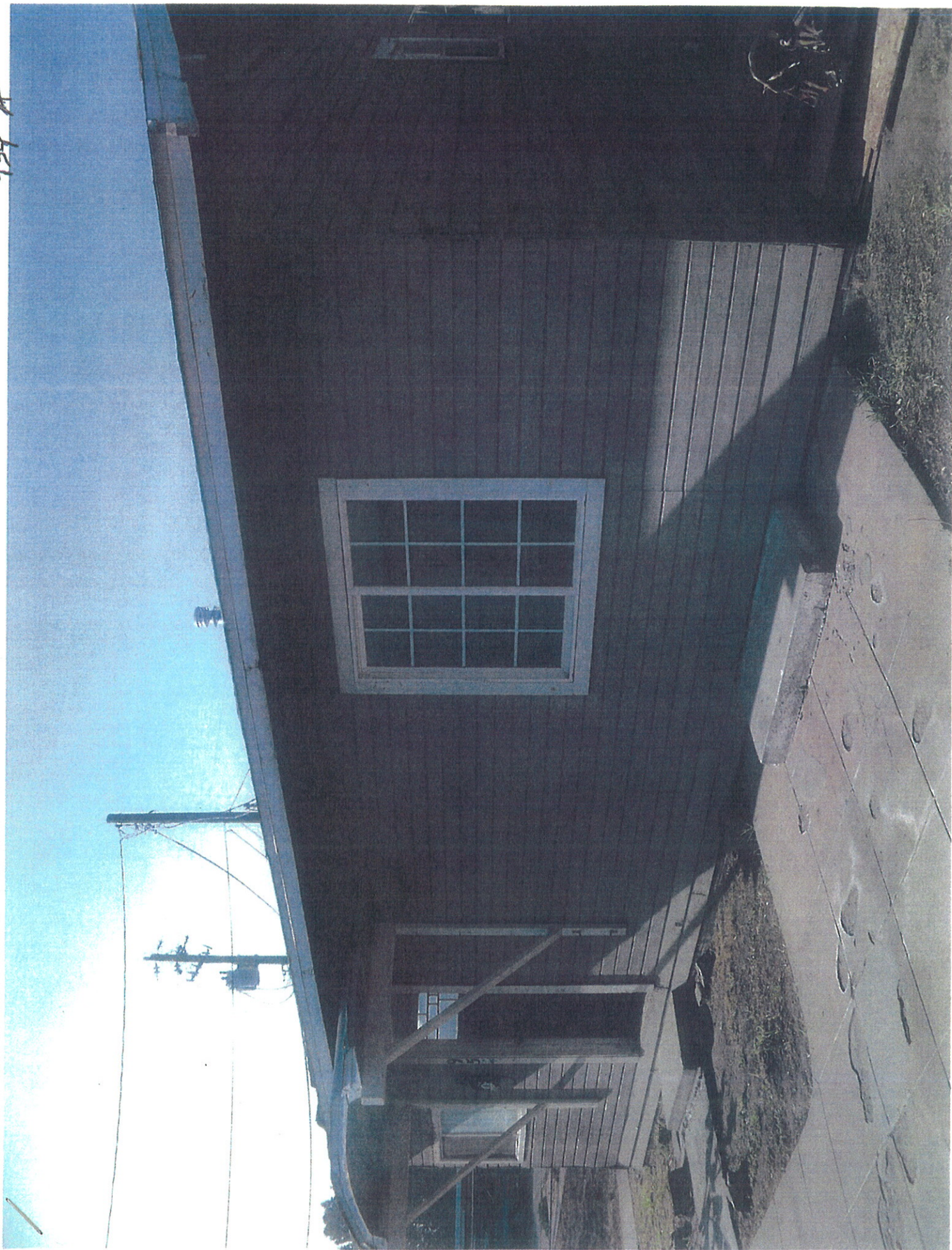
950 -960 Divisadero
Cost Comparison of Windows

Windows Facing Divisadero	Vinyl	Wood	Difference in Vinyl Versus Wood Along Divisadero	Windows Facing Courtyard	Vinyl	Wood	Difference in Vinyl Versus Wood Along Divisadero
950 Facing Divisadero	\$ 1,568.00	\$ 4,681.00	\$ 3,113.00	950 Facing Courtyard	\$ 1,364.00	\$ 3,999.00	\$ 2,635.00
956 Facing Divisadero	\$ 1,568.00	\$ 4,681.00	\$ 3,113.00	954 Facing Courtyard	\$ 577.00	\$ 1,725.00	\$ 1,148.00
				956 Facing Courtyard	\$ 1,364.00	\$ 3,999.00	\$ 2,635.00
				958 Facing Courtyard	\$ 605.00	\$ 1,725.00	\$ 1,120.00
				960 Facing Courtyard	\$ 1,510.00	\$ 5,659.00	\$ 4,149.00
Difference in Cost of Vinyl vs. Wood			\$ 6,226.00				\$ 11,687.00

Total Difference in Cost of Vinyl versus Wood

$\$6,226.00 + \$11,687 = \$17,913.00$

954 A



960 A

